PENGUIN CLASSICS

DASOBIQUIET

Hindsight is Not Perfect

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Hindsight is Not Perfect

by DAsObiQuiet

Summary

Paved with good intentions or not, the road back from Hell is a difficult, slippery slope for those who choose to walk it as Anakin has. Now he has to face the consequences of his choices, avoid suspicion of everyone from the Jedi Council to Palpatine and try to prevent the future from turning out as badly Before all while somehow finding a way to balance the Force... *again!*

REVAMPED!

- Translation into Deutsch available: [Restricted Work] by Lady_of_Dare

A Second Chance?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Peace, he supposed, shouldn't be a strange concept, but to Anakin Skywalker it was. The actual word in and of itself was grammatically simple enough, and its meaning should have been just as easy to grasp, but it wasn't. Not really. Not to him, at least.

In his youth, he had associated peace with the word 'boring'. After all, to his young mind, peace only came through activities that just couldn't keep his attention. One should find peace in meditation (for which he could never seem to sit still enough). One should find peace by letting go of slights (something that tended to get one killed or at least drove one into debt on Tatooine). One was supposed to find peace through inner reflection (something that tended to only remind him how inadequate he'd felt).

Peace was calm and balance, but Anakin had liked his world wild and unbalanced to the point that only his unique skill set could walk the tight rope between life and death. He'd craved recognition and he'd always been good at doing things other people couldn't (or wouldn't) do. He'd worked hard to be worthy of recognition – to be someone everyone else could look up to because that would validate what he'd given up.

He'd wanted to be someone a slave could never be.

He hadn't cared for boring, and so he hadn't much cared for peace even though he'd gone through the motions, at first in memory of Qui-Gon and later for Obi-Wan.

Around the time of the Clone Wars was when he really started to understand now necessary and desirable peace was. He had wanted to race and spar for fun rather than to hone the edge that would keep him alive. True, he hadn't exactly rejected the attention everyone had thrown at him, but that had always been offset by the troops he left behind on each battlefield on top of the innocent civilians who had lost home and family and their lives.

He'd wanted to end the fighting and death and destruction and that had become his definition of the word: the lack of fighting.

He had tried to bring peace back by fighting for the Republic, with less than spectacular results, no matter what the holovids said. Then came the end of the war: that which he'd so desperately wanted, happened, but only at the cost of everything he'd been fighting for. He did not enjoy revisiting those events.

And yet he had.

He'd gone over the memories of that day time and time again, because they never ceased to make his vision go red with anger while his stomach simultaneously churned with guilt. They brought the blinding pain that never truly went away to the surface – a ripping, searing agony that shot through his chest and would have taken his breath away had he not been on a respirator. It had given Darth Vader strength because it tore apart whatever had been left of his heart every single time he thought about it.

It hadn't been worth it. The end of the war hadn't brought peace. Not truly. While there hadn't been as much wide-spread conflict during the Imperial Reign, the Empire was not, by any stretch of the imagination, synonymous for peace, no matter how much he'd wanted it to be. He'd never dared acknowledge it, even to himself, but in that black little thing that harbored the pieces of his heart, he'd known that the galaxy had gone from a proverbial supernova to a black hole.

He'd ignored it because he'd stopped caring, giving the whole ideal of peace up as a bad job – a misleading, unobtainable dream. And if he as a person no longer needed such a childish ideal, why should the rest of the universe?

Yes, in his life, he'd resented the idea of personal peace, fought and rejected it, and then as a Sith, thoroughly abandoned it.

Which was probably what made the whole idea that he may have actually obtained it now that much more incredible. He had somehow managed to turn his back on all of those darker tendencies and he had just come to realize why people – why Jedi – actively sought peace. It wasn't boring and it wasn't as simple as a state of "not fighting". True peace was an anchor in a stormy sea, a safe port for an otherwise doomed ship, and a light that drove away the metaphorical darkness. It was the best of everything and nothing and he knew now that he had only preferred other states of being because he had not known what true peace was.

And 'freeing' didn't even begin to describe how it felt.

He found it odd that only by abandoning the darkness had he begun to find real freedom. The Sith code stated that the dark side of the Force would set the user free. He certainly hadn't ever felt like he'd been free. Funny how he hadn't been able to see that before when it seemed so obvious to him now. At the end.

All of his childhood insecurities, his teenage frustration and his adult life in general had subconsciously plagued him simultaneously for decades. The roots of many of those problems that had been so important before somehow now seemed to have grown… insignificant. He felt warmth, and courage, and a soft stillness that called him home – to a place where he could rest; where everything he'd done didn't matter anymore.

There is no death, there is the Force.

His eyes didn't seem to want to stay open, and even when he could pry the eyelids up, he could hardly see out of his own helmet. His lungs were not getting the oxygen they needed and his limbs barely responded to his thoughts anymore. He was sure the lightning that had run rampant through his body when he'd picked up the Emperor had short-circuited far too many systems and there would be no possible way to save his life, not in the time they had in any case.

In short, he was dying.

He'd always hated the idea of dying before and had struggled against the idea with a fervor that put other sapients to shame. Now, though… now that he had finally made a decision he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt was right, now that he'd acted and destroyed the man he had mistakenly at one point considered his rescuer and confidant, now that he had done what he should have done years ago, the thought of dying didn't seem so distasteful. He could die in peace… and that went far beyond okay and into 'miracle' territory.

The person beneath him – Luke (it was Luke, right? Yes, that was his Force signature) – buckled under the strain of carrying his father's dead weight. Vader… no, Anakin. He was Anakin now. Anakin somehow saw a change in view and realized he'd fallen to the floor. It hadn't hurt in the slightest. Then again, he couldn't really feel anything except for his burning lungs. And Luke. He could feel Luke and the Force again. Not the darkness that had raged and burned for so long but the blinding light and calm…

He could sense men hurrying around him, all of them on the verge of

panic, likely in regards to the battle outside that wasn't going as it should. And yet they all seemed to be sticking to the training and protocols set in place. For the first time in over two decades, Anakin felt pride for the men he had trained and sorrow that they would all be lost. Funny how everything else seemed so calm. No one would be able to tell that the stable station they were on would soon be destroyed.

He closed his eyes for just a moment, savoring these last few moments as his son dragged him along. Perhaps he should just tell Luke to leave him. He would deserve no less for his crimes and somehow he knew that Luke would leave the station alive, but Anakin wouldn't. The Force? Probably. He didn't care. As long as his son lived, he could handle anything else.

He didn't know how long it took Luke to drag him – likely to a hangar bay – but all too soon, they stopped. With monumental effort Anakin forced his eyes open again. Where were they? He recognized the underbelly of a ship. Right the hangar bay. Why had they stopped? Oh. Luke looked exhausted. Why hadn't he used the Force? Perhaps he couldn't concentrate? The boy did only have a few years of training under his belt and he had just almost been electrocuted to death.

A flash of anger and annoyance rushed through him at that, but he pushed it away, refusing to let such things sour these minutes for him, and smiled up at the worried features so similar to his own, despite knowing that his son couldn't actually see him.

"Luke… " he hadn't realized how much it would hurt to try and talk, but it only took a moment for him to push past it. He'd lived with worse before. "Help me take this mask off," he finished.

His son's brow furrowed. "But you'll die."

Anakin smiled sadly. "Nothing can stop that now. Just for once… " he faded off and forced air into his lungs (was the respirator not working?), "let me… look on you with my own eyes."

Reluctantly, Luke conceded and reached over to take off the black helmet that had been his identity for his entire life as a Sith. His nimble fingers searched for the mechanical releases and found them. Then slowly, almost reverently (although Anakin couldn't begin to understand why) he lifted it away and placed it beside them. Then he reached back for the second piece and managed to gently pull that off as well.

Anakin hadn't seen anything but the inside of his hyperbolic chamber without the mask for what felt like centuries and the sight before him almost took what little breath he still had left away. He hadn't really expected any color from the Death Star. Color was, after all, a frivolity that the Emperor wouldn't stand for. Thus, his son's head stood out in such stark contrast to the drab, gray background. His eyes, however, were what really drew his attention; clear blue, unmarred and so determined.

Hadn't his own eyes been like that once? He knew the answer should be 'yes', but sometimes his early life seemed like a far-off dream that had never really existed.

Apparently whatever Luke had been expecting had not been what he'd gotten because he looked surprised and sad – probably wanted to see more than the pallid, scarred ghost of a man who probably didn't resemble him at all anymore.

Still, Anakin couldn't help but smile, albeit tiredly. He had gotten his last wish, and the sight before him couldn't have been more magnificent.

"Now go, my son," he managed to voice his previous thoughts. "Leave me."

Luke shook his head. "No, you're coming with me! I'll not leave you, I've got to save you!"

"You already have," he wheezed, trying to ignore the fact that it was getting harder and harder to speak. "You were right. You were right about me. Tell your sister… you were right… "

Unable to hold on any longer, he closed his eyes and allowed himself to do something he'd never been able to do before: he let go, and slipped into the waiting arms of the Force.

He found his consciousness set adrift in calming waves that he – for once – had no problem trusting. It felt good to trust again. As he floated in the warmth of the Living Force, several thoughts began to meander across his mind. The first was how grateful he felt towards his son; the son who had believed in him and who had loved him enough to look past the monster he had become. The second thought had a much darker connotation as something whispered that he did not belong here; that he did not deserve this. At the moment, though, he found he didn't care and so he left the thought behind with the rest of the darkness. A third thought wondered when his consciousness

and sense of self would cease to exist. When would he fade into the light and become truly one with the Force? Part of him disliked that idea, but part of him couldn't help but look forward to it. He would be truly free of his burdens then.

Then, strangely enough, a forest, full of life in a way he'd never begun to consider before, slowly faded into view around him. Where was this? Was he still in the Force? Was this a part of the Force? It was so dark around him, after all, but it wasn't the cold darkness he'd grown so used to. No, he could still feel the peace of the Living Force.

Almost without thought, he found himself moving towards some nearby lights, the closest one flickering through the deep shadows – a fire. He drew closer and saw that someone had erected a funeral pier.

He recognized the mask on top.

As the flames burned, he began to feel as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. The burning of the body relieved him of his final burden: the final connection he had with the material universe. A figure moved on the opposite side of the fire; the lone mourner… his son. The boy – no, young man – apparently felt his duty had been done because he turned to rejoin to the obvious festivities.

Luke's friends, the smuggler and the princess of course, danced and laughed as they dodged the little fur balls native to the planet. Luke wove gracefully through the crowds as he approached them and received a warm hug from both of them. They began to steer him towards the food the ewoks had laid out – a feast that looked surprisingly palatable for humans and Anakin would bet his newly found peace that the drinks going around were alcoholic. Even the droids looked happy.

Of course they would. They were all celebrating the deaths of two men and consequently, the end of a tyrannical reign of terror.

A reign of terror he had helped to create.

A reign of terror he had helped to destroy.

He watched for a few more minutes with a content expression, and then his son seemed to sense something. Breaking away from the group, he walked to the edge of the large clearing and leaned against a tree, eyes focused directly on Anakin… and the two presences beside him.

That rather surprising thought brought the first real smile in years to his mouth, and he turned to see both Yoda and Obi-Wan grinning right back. He could tell in their smiles that they'd forgiven him, and that brought even more relief to his once heavily-burdened heart.

Looking back at Luke, his own grin widened, as the boy had a smile himself. A cheek-to-cheek grin of pure happiness.

He got that smile from his mother.

For a moment, everything was right and good. How he reveled in it. So this was what he'd sought all along? He wanted to say so many things, but before he got the chance, the scene faded, far faster than it had appeared, and he went back to his aimless floating in the light.

He would have been happy to stay that way, but a voice interrupted the endless stillness.

"Anakin, if you could change anything in your life, would you?" That sounded like Obi-Wan.

He paused, thinking. Faces of countless Jedi flashed across his mind; people cowering in fear of him; people dying as he choked the life out of them. Padmé…

"Yes," he responded simply because really, that should have been obvious. Still, he appreciated that his old master had asked instead of merely assuming.

"Then consider this my gift to make up for leaving you behind."

"Leaving me… " he started as he sensed the presence that belonged to his oldest friend withdraw, and reached out to pull it closer. "Wait… Obi-Wan! Master!"

Then, before he knew anything else, the light faded from his consciousness, leaving a gaping hole in his soul.

xXx

Consciousness came back to him slowly. The world seemed to spin around him and part of him wished for nothing more but to continue his rest. His dream had been… lovely. No other word could describe it, and he wished to hold onto that before returning to the vile existence that was his life. He had learned long ago, however, that doing so never brought desirable results, and so he refused to let go of

his growing awareness.

Eventually, he noticed that said awareness didn't feel right.

His lethargic mind fell back onto habit and took a moment to run down and address what exactly had gone wrong. He started with his breathing and ran into his first major difference. No respirator sounds met his ears. No harsh hissing aided his strangely painless chest with breathing in the dry, harsh air that he could practically taste… something he hadn't been able to do since his fall.

Then he realized that he could feel his hands… and his legs.

Any thought for remaining asleep was shoved harshly aside as he fought his way into the physical world. His eyes flew open, and he struggled to sit up. Color bombarded him and he had to shut his eyes again. It wouldn't have been particularly bright or eye-catching to anyone who hadn't been looking through red lenses for almost a quarter of a century. Of course, in the next instant his hand moved to his face. His fingers touched soft flesh, not a hard mask.

Bracing himself, he forced his eyes open for the second time and looked down at his chest… where he found clothes. A tunic and sleep pants to be precise. He did not find a panel of blinking lights signaling the status of his life support; no black suit and no mechanics. As a matter of fact, he recognized the worn, tan and brown outfit now covering his considerably smaller frame. He hadn't seen it in more than three decades.

Eyes widening, he whipped his head around again, taking in the warm, monotone shades with surprise. An old room in an old house, small but homey and comfortable. From the threadbare rugs to the mismatched curtains by the discolored transparisteel window, he recognized every single centimeter. It screamed of poverty and of despair and yet, this was home. More precisely it was his home from Tatooine. His home that he hadn't been in for nearly 40 years.

He sat there for several seconds as his mind tried to process all of these observations and make sense out of them. It failed rather miserably. So what was this? A vision? Or was he really dead after all and this was some sort of memory he was reliving? Or he could have been captured (by whom, he had no idea) and his consciousness entrapped in a simulator or some kind. Or –

"Ani?" A soft voice from the other room simultaneously cut through his inner rant and practically stopped his heart.

He had to be dreaming. Had to be. Involuntarily, his eyes drew towards the door where the sound had come from. Someone was approaching. He could both feel them and hear their footsteps, but he didn't – couldn't – believe. It just wasn't possible. She was dead and not sensitive and so couldn't retain her consciousness in the Force. Right? So there was no way this could be…

And then she walked through the old doorway with a towel over her shoulder and hands lingering on the walls as she'd walked, something he remembered she had done often.

"I thought I heard you," she said with that kind smile that still haunted his dreams and those tired eyes lighting up as she focused on her son.

He couldn't answer her. She couldn't physically be there, and he knew he was probably looking at the projection of a memory if anything and yet… He didn't want to chance opening his mouth and chasing her projection away. Half of him wanted to run to her, hold her and never let go. The other half wanted to run in the opposite direction in shame. He didn't deserve to see her again, but still, he couldn't take his eyes off of her.

His mother's apparition apparently noticed something off about his reaction to seeing her because she frowned in worry. He'd always hated seeing that look on her face and noted how her hands found each other and clenched tightly like they always had when something had gone awry.

"Ani, are you alright?"

No. But he couldn't even seem to be able to cause this immensely painful, *realistic* dream version of his mother any more worry. He had to respond. He couldn't force himself to speak to her, but he did manage to nod.

Her frown turned skeptical. "Are you sure?"

Another nod.

She continued to study him, completely ignoring his reassurance. Then she walked over to his bed and knelt down beside him. He flinched and looked away from her. He knew that would only make her more worried, but he couldn't help it.

"Oh, Ani, please tell me what's wrong," she said softly, her voice pleading.

And then she *touched* him, her hand resting on his cheek and jaw. He actually jumped at that point, scrambling away with a gasp. Part of his mind noted with a dry sort of disgust how he, a dark lord of the Sith, panicked at the sight of this mere woman. The other part of him did not care. This could not be real, and yet… it was. How… ?

"Ani?!" she asked, a mixture of confusion, fear and hurt obvious in her tone.

"Y… you're real?" he asked in a high, course voice.

"Of course I am, Ani," she replied slowly and held out a hand towards him again. He froze unable to move away – refusing to accept what his mind continued to tell him, but not wanting to cause her more distress. "Why wouldn't you think so?"

She seemed to realize that his reactions would be unusual because her hand froze a few centimeters away from him, hovering in the air in invitation.

He shook his head. "You were dead. You died. I saw you. I *felt* you!"

Recognition came to her eyes. "Oh, Ani, it was just a dream. I'm right here. I'm alive."

Anakin balked. That had all just been a dream? His entire life? The Jedi, the Clone Wars, the Sith, the Rebellion, the Empire… no, he couldn't accept that. Ever. That had been too real. He knew too much. He could still recite Sith teachings (and Jedi precepts for that matter). He couldn't get that from a vision… could he? And he'd never heard of any vision being so *detailed*…

"Ani?" His mother's voice broke through his thoughts. She still hadn't moved. His eyes followed her hand and arm back to her face.

She'd touched him. That meant she was physically here. Right? His mind ran over the options he'd come up with. This couldn't be a vision or a memory. A simulation? No, it was too detailed. Some sort of mind-trap? Something to do with the Force? He could accept that… but it didn't feel right.

Could he have woken up in the past somehow? Was it possible? He glanced back at the hand in front of him and reached up with his own fingers to touch it reluctantly, almost expecting it to not be there. His hand met real flesh and bone, warm and tanned and calloused…

Her hand closed around his and her gray eyes shone with just a touch of relief. She was real. She was real. Oh, Force… what did this mean? The implications went beyond mind-blowing, but it felt right. How did this happen?

He remembered Luke… and he remembered what must have been him dying. And then the party and then… Obi-Wan? Something about another chance? Had that been real? What… ?!

"Do you believe me now?" his mother asked, cutting through his train of thoughts.

And then it truly hit him. This. Was. *Real.*

In the days and months to come, he would reprimand himself multiple times a day for his lack of control. He'd been General Anakin Skywalker, Jedi Knight and commander in the Republic, and Darth Vader, second only to the Emperor himself. His actions should never be reduced to anything so undignified. However, in that moment, he wasn't a Sith or a Jedi or a General or a Commander. In that instant his mind reverted to the equivalent of his body and he was nothing but a nine-year-old child. He'd moved before he could think about it, throwing his arms around her neck and clutching tightly to her tunic as he buried his head in her shoulders.

"Mom," he whispered, barely able to make his throat work at all.

"Oh, Ani," she said as her own arms enfolded him. "It will be alright. I'm right here and I'm not leaving you."

He knew she couldn't keep that promise. She didn't have the ability or even the freedom to do so, but he nodded anyway, wanting to do nothing but hold onto someone he didn't think he would ever see again. She was *here*, alive and whole and sturdy, not the weakened, tortured person who had barely been able to lift her hand and tell him she loved him. This was the woman his heart remembered; a strong, dedicated woman with an iron will and an all-encompassing heart despite her hardships.

"Shh," she whispered, lifting him up and turning around to sit on his bed while cradling him in her arms. She rocked back and forth on the worn bed and even began to hum. The long forgotten tune immediately sprung back to his mind as her deep voice lightly brushed the notes. She must have sensed that he needed this, because they sat like that for a long time, and he couldn't have been more grateful.

Chapter End Notes

A/N 2: Feb 2020 - Revamp #2. Because I can and I've grown as a writer. Thank you so much to Khalthar! He went through this all for me and helped fix some grammatical issues and smooth over some parts. If there are any issues, let me know! Please and thank you!

A/N: SO, here I have the revamp. Hey, I started writing this one a good 5-6 years ago. I hope I've improved since then. :) In any case, here are my rules for when you're reading this fic. Please note that this is important:

I like constructive criticism. That means if you tell me what you like or what you don't like, I'll take it into consideration so long as you are polite and give me the respect any person deserves. That DOES NOT mean I will agree with you or think something should be changed. I wrote what I wrote for a reason, but I will give what you say serious thought.

However, if you get on and just say "It's great, more!" then I probably won't respond. Actually, I'll say it right now, 'Thanks'. If you get on and start flaming me and telling me this isn't original or that I haven't changed anything in the actual story, well this IS a time-travel fic, so nothing is going to immediately change just because someone wakes up with future knowledge in their heads. Thus a lot of this first story will be very similar to the original story to establish the character and is written so you can compare his character here to his character in the movies. If you reiterate this or start telling me that the story is stupid or what not, I'll simply think you have no patience or grasp of the significance of nuances and disregard whatever you say as unintelligent rambling before blocking you and (if you are belligerent and degrading) reporting you. I have no problem doing this and you have been warned.

Also, (IMPORTANT) here are some things to keep in mind. A 9-year-old human brain is not fully developed. Taking Anakin's memories from his future self and shoving them into his child-like body can be compared to taking a program from 2019 and trying to run it on a computer from 2000... there is not going to be similar processing capabilities. We also have to deal with the fact that his brain already has familiar pathways created and so he will be more childish than he would be if he, say, came back in his 46-year-old body.

Another note, I've dealt with many people who have lived through traumatic circumstances. In many cases, when someone (especially a child) lives through something their mind cannot handle, their mental and emotional progress is severely restrained. So, even years—decades—later, when that someone is reminded of that specific time, their mental and emotional state reverts to the status it was at the time of the original trauma. This is one of many forms of reversion.

Anakin being separated from his mother was something he saw as traumatic, and then he was told to just let her go instead of working through the feelings he had regarding her, and then (yes, years later, but he still had issues from his childhood) she died in his arms. Yeah, I can see him reverting to a child-like state for a few minutes here in the story. If you're disappointed because big, bad Darth Vader isn't acting like Darth Vader, well that's kind of the point of the story and this may not be for you. Just FYI. However I do think it is more than plausible and if you disagree, well we'll just have to agree to disagree.

Meetings

His mother had talked to Watto and told him Anakin was sick. The Toydarian hadn't been happy, but he also preferred his slaves to live. He'd allowed Anakin to stay home on the condition that he worked twice as hard and twice as long the next day. The former Sith Lord had spent the rest of that day following his mother around, afraid that if he took his eyes off of her that this would all disappear. He also spent quite a bit of time berating himself for being so clingy and for his lack of restraint that morning.

That didn't mean he had the will to leave her.

So he sat quietly by while his mother went about her household chores and then her bookkeeping chores and then her errands. She kept shooting him concerned glances and it took him far too long to figure out why when he showed no other signs of sickness. Then he realized that, as a child, he'd always had two rather strong attributes: an abundance of energy and a rather fierce independence. He supposed those were pretty common for most children (or at least not *uncommon*). He'd also lacked the discipline necessary to reign in his energy when he'd originally been this age, discipline that he had in spades now (something he was rather grateful for as that energy had indeed returned with his younger body). Now he realized that he would have to act like his younger self had in order to alleviate her fears.

And therein lay the problem. He'd purposefully forgotten his childhood for decades, and even now he had problems remembering how he used to behave. If that wasn't bad enough, he really didn't know *how* he should behave otherwise. Few Sith returned to the light and those that did were stricken from the records of the Sith or cited as examples of weakness. It hadn't happened since Darth Bane and as a consequence, he didn't really have much of a precedence to emulate. At this point, he wouldn't know how to act were he an adult, let alone a child. 'Awkward' didn't begin to describe the situation and he had no idea how to alleviate said awkwardness.

What was worse, he had a sneaking suspicion that this state of mind would persist for a while to come yet.

The time he spent quietly following his mother around also gave him quite a lot of room for contemplation. Firstly, he was convinced that he had actually come from the future, or his memories had in any

case. That conclusion continued to feel right no matter what other ideas he came up with. Despite this, part of him still did not want to accept that and remained on edge and wary.

When he went to bed that night, his mother insisted that he sleep in her room and even pulled his sleeping pallet into the room, next to her bed. He had absolutely no problem with the arrangement. He didn't sleep much that night, too afraid that doing so would somehow bring everything back to the present where he was either dead or a Sith Apprentice who hated himself and his life and everything he had become.

Around that time, he began to really think on his situation and couldn't help but draw parallels. Anakin hadn't ever *really* forgotten what it was like to be a slave. How could he? He'd never truly been free. He'd realized this not long after he'd fallen, but in the days following his awakening in his younger body, the truth drove itself home rather forcefully. He realized that he had always been a slave in one form or another. The dark side hadn't set him free as its teachings claimed and the light had never openly given him delusions of freedom, although he had originally thought he'd been freed. So it didn't surprise him when he realized that being "property" again didn't seem to be too much of a change from his most recent lifestyle. It was more than a little discouraging though.

The next morning he tried to act more like his mother would expect. He smiled a lot and rushed around as he got ready for the day, hoping that it would help. From the worried looks she continued to shoot him, he doubted it worked. Unfortunately, it was the best he could do.

Watto yelled at him for being late (which he wasn't, actually he'd gotten there early) when he walked into the shop. The Toydarian had immediately set him to cleaning the shop, a task made infinitely easier by his ability to use the Force. Apparently, his skill in that area had returned with him as well. Definitely a positive development as his physical conditioning had, unsurprisingly, not.

Now, as he calmly worked his way around Watto's shop and the piles of junk the Toydarian called goods, he couldn't help but feel a sense of contentment. No, that wasn't the word. Resignation. Yes, that fit his state of mind. Even to him it seemed rather sad that this child's body, usually so full of hope and dreams, would simply stroll calmly around like… well, like a man at least thirty years older. A man who had seen much in his life, and had had his dreams thoroughly shattered before his very eyes. He wondered if anyone besides his mother had noticed.

Watto definitely hadn't.

The door of the shop opening followed by the angry stomping of feet didn't even distract him. He'd already felt the being's presence coming in their direction anyway. Instead, he simply went about his work, marveling at the idea of having all four limbs back again. He'd done that more than once the day before as well. He could *feel* the texture of the surface he was carrying, the dirt and grit on the counter that he'd constantly tried to clean, the slick, slimy feel of the grease he used to fix the machines, the heat of the afternoon sun. All of these had been marginally unpleasant, and yet he couldn't help but savor each and every sensation. Perhaps he'd begun to accept his conclusion a little more thoroughly than he'd originally assessed if he could focus on these small things so thoroughly.

"… Slave boy got the order wrong! I'll be back tomorrow, and if you don't have what I need, I'll take it to the Hutts!" This time Anakin couldn't help but look up and watch as the humanoid (probably a bounty hunter judging by the hodge-podge equipment and old-fashioned armor he wore) yelled into the back as he stormed out of the shop.

A feeling of unease crept over him. He remembered this day now…

The most common way to discipline a slave was to inflict pain. Watto, being a lazy but focused Toydarian, didn't beat them often. That didn't mean they weren't punished.

"No rations for a week," he hissed at Anakin, lumbering inside the doorway on his too-skinny legs, eyes continuing to glare after the person walking out. He knew very well that it probably wasn't Anakin's fault, that the bounty hunter had lied through his teeth, but apparently there was enough proof against Watto that he couldn't take that chance. Now he'd lost money, and their "punishment" would help to make up for some of the loss. Sadly, slaves weren't paid. Not conventionally in any case. They relied on their masters for food and other sustenance. Anakin could handle going without food. Having to be intravenously fed for decades did that to a person. His mother on the other hand…

The anger he thought he'd forsaken rushed forward all too quickly. How dare this tiny being try to make them pay for something out of their control?! How dare he hurt Shmi?! It would be so easy to choke the life out of this creature and then see what they could –

He cut his thought process off immediately, bringing a hand up to his head to try and ward off a headache. That train of thought wouldn't get him anywhere. If he killed Watto, even if no one else realized what happened, they'd either be claimed by someone related to the toydarian, or the local slave guild would claim them and sell them off again, probably separately. He didn't even want to think what that would do to his mother.

Besides, they had some storage at home. They'd made it through situations like this before. It wouldn't be too difficult.

But he would not agree to it. He'd had enough of following orders.

So instead he glared up at the toydarian, who had glanced at Anakin warily. Before anything else could be said, though, the blue creature turned and lifted into the air, floating back outside.

Anakin watched with clenched fists for a while before he was able to force himself to relax. He figured he probably should try and make himself scarce the next day when the humanoid came back. He didn't know if he could hold his anger in if he saw that scum again.

He'd told Luke that there was good in him. He'd turned back to the light, and, awkward or not, he was determined not to fall again.

Somehow, he found himself even more thrown into his work that day.

xXx

He'd forgotten how much he liked just working on machines. It brought a sense of calm that he couldn't seem to achieve any other way. It also brought frustration he couldn't find any other way, but that was, and always had been, worth it. He found it interesting that he'd been back in the past (for lack of a better definition of his situation) for barely a standard week, and already he seemed to be rediscovering so many little things about himself that he hadn't meant to forget in his time as a Sith. Sometimes he found himself wondering if it all had been a vision or a dream. Every time he even thought that, though, the sense of 'not right' skyrocketed. There were just too many things that he knew that one couldn't simply get from a vision – details and ideas and nuances that just didn't happen in even the most thorough of dreams. And he still knew far more than a rim-world slave should about Jedi and Sith teachings for him to believe that it hadn't been real.

Letting out a sigh (and feeling grateful that he could do so, as the life-

support mask wouldn't have allowed it), he picked up a hydrospanner and went back to work on his current salvage project. At times like this, he found himself wishing for just a few moments that he could be someone else; someone who could work as a mechanic or a racer or even a bounty hunter for the rest of his life. He wouldn't have to worry about any stupid prophecy, the Jedi or Palpatine. For a few moments, he indulged that train of thought. What would it be like to have such a non-assuming life? He'd just need to find a way to free himself and his mother, then he could move to some rim-world planet and start up a business. They could live there and just avoid…

No, he shook his head regretfully. He could never just sit aside and do nothing. Doing so would go against every instinct he'd ever had, for better or for worse. It would drive him insane. Not that interfering before had helped him keep his sanity. Could he call his choice to follow the dark side one of insanity? Could one still be considered insane if they knew they'd lost possession of their mental facilities? Was it possible to truly regain himself again or were these moments of clarity just a respite before he succumbed to madness again?

It wasn't a pleasant thought.

He was forcibly avoiding that particular line of thinking when a twinge in the Force caused him to drop his tools and shoot to his feet. Two bright presences had suddenly come near to the planet, and he recognized them. Well one of them. There was no way he could ever forget it, after all.

"Obi-Wan," he muttered, more out of shock than anything. That would mean the other Force presence was Qui-Gon Jinn, the man who had originally found him.

For the first time since he'd learned he had a son, he almost panicked.

Of course, neither Jedi nor Sith panic. He'd gone through decades of training and living as either one or the other, so he kept that particular feeling in check. Barely. Ironic that his Obi-Wan would have approved.

He forcibly took a calming breath and went through a mental checklist. Well, he now knew exactly when he'd come back to. Somehow, he'd thought it had been earlier.

What to do first? Check your mental shields. Make sure they can't sense you. He did so, relieved to find them firmly in place. He nodded in nervous satisfaction. *Second thing to do…*

He didn't know. Oh Force, he didn't know!

Funny how quickly panic can be turned into anger.

Calm down, Skywalker, he told himself firmly. *Think it through logically.*

Unfortunately, logic had never really been his strongest suit. Using several breathing exercises, he forced himself to (yet again) calm down and began running through the different possible scenarios all while berating himself for not being more prepared. He'd known they would be coming sometime, why hadn't it crossed his mind?

He forced his thoughts onto the task at hand. He'd have time to berate himself later.

Option number one: Avoid them at all costs and hope he could outwit the Jedi Master. Pros if he succeeded: He wouldn't have to worry about the Jedi Order again, at least for a little while. Cons: He and his mother would both remain slaves for many more years at least, or until someone ticked Anakin off enough to make him use the dark side…

Result: Difficult to accomplish, many potentially undesirable side effects, an extreme amount of unknown variables.

Option number two: Let things play out as they had before, get off planet and then refuse to be a Jedi. Pros: He'd be free and while being brought to the attention of the Jedi, he wouldn't have to worry about *becoming* one. He could also begin working to free his mother. Cons: If his presence was brought to Jedi attention, it would probably be brought to the attention of a certain Sith Lord… and he couldn't have that. In his current body there was no way he'd ever be able to stand up to Sidious – or any of his apprentices (as much as he was loathe to admit it). Without Jedi protection, he'd have to outrun the darksiders and lightsiders that came after him – an untrained, extremely powerful Force sensitive, well at least as far as they would know. He could probably do so for a little while at least as he had a good knowledge of many outer-rim star systems after searching them for Rebel bases, but how would his mother react to that? Not well, he suspected.

Result: Plausible but only slightly less difficult with even more unknown variables and a much higher risk factor.

Option number three: Let things play out as they had before and join the Jedi order… again. Pros: It would provide the most control, as he

would know many events before they would happen, and he would be in a position to do something about said events. Cons: Could he convince the Jedi and everyone else that he was just an innocent ex-slave? The Jedi he remembered had been oblivious to the world around them, but strangely focused when it came to the details. Could he keep Sith training secret? If he wanted to gain their trust, he would have to keep it from them.

On top of that, he would be forced confront face-to-face people he'd slaughtered in a past life. As far as he was concerned, his little hands still had the blood of all those innocents dripping off of them. He would also be subjecting himself to the rules and regulations of the Jedi Order again, and he didn't know if he had the patience for that.

Scratch that, he was positive he didn't have the patience for that.

He'd also have to take on the mantra of "the Chosen One" again, and he knew he did not want to deal with that.

His biggest argument regarding this option though, was the fact that he'd be following the path that he'd failed at last time. Would he just be setting himself up to lose everything again? He hadn't even realized at the time he'd Fallen that he'd personally destroyed anything he'd ever worked for, all to gain power. Indeed hate and anger were powerful, but was that control worth it? Perhaps only if power and control were the ultimate goals. When had his goal turned from protecting those he loved to gaining and holding more power?

Focus, Skywalker, he told himself, forcing his thoughts back to the problem at hand and rather annoyed that his mind seemed determined to wander.

Result for this option: Emotionally difficult, but with the least amount of unknown variables.

Didn't look like he had much of a choice. All three options would be difficult to pull off and live with when it came to the aftermath.

Out of habit, he began pacing, looking at the floor without really seeing it, hands behind his back as he ran over each argument in his mind.

He couldn't decide. What should he choose? Maybe he really should just ignore their ever approaching presences. His eyes wandered over to the opening leading into the front of the shop warily. It would help if he could remember exactly how the situation had proceeded the

first time. He could only vaguely recall. Was he losing his memories? Or was this normal? Then again, what about his situation could be considered normal?

"What are youa doing? Geta back to work!" Watto grouched at him as he passed through the part of the shop Anakin had been working in.

He shot the toydarian a glare, and was a little surprised when the annoyance on the other's face turned into an expression of uncertain fear. Anakin looked away first, wondering just how he'd been able to scare Watto. Had he projected something through the Force? If so, then his control had slipped too far. Either that or he'd just gotten too used to intimidating people.

Watto seemed to recover and shook his head as if to clear it. Then, without another word, he flew into the front of the shop, leaving Anakin to pick up his tools and start working again. Maybe as he worked, he'd come up with another plan.

Somehow, he doubted it.

xXx

It took them almost two standard hours to land on the planet and come into town. He could feel them walking now, coming slowly closer and closer. Right about then, he thought about who he would see in the small group, and immediately froze. *She'd* be with Qui-Gon.

Padmé. How could he have forgotten?

No, not forgotten; forcibly pushed from his mind… for so long, as was his habit.

What was he going to do now? How should he confront her? How could he face her after what he'd done to her? How could he do anything?

For the first time in his life, he considered the merits of simply bolting. By the time Watto realized anything and set off the transmitter, Qui-Gon and his little misfit group would be long gone. It took every ounce of control he had to not just drop his tools and run right then and there. After all, anything would be better than to face her again.

Problem was, as much as he didn't want to see her again, he yearned to. How long had it been since he'd been able to actually look at her

beautiful face, flowing hair, and soft, brown eyes that always managed to steal his breath away? Oh, how he longed to just catch a glimpse of her… but he did not deserve it. Still, without physically hiding, how could he avoid it? And he hated the idea of hiding from anything.

He tracked the more unfamiliar signature as it approached, only slightly relieved that Obi-Wan didn't come with them. By the time Qui-Gon had entered town, Anakin had worked himself up into a rather nasty state.

His distraction made fixing the parts Watto had dumped in front of him that day particularly difficult. He'd had to reverse the polarity on the power couplings of this particular project five times due to mistakes and miscalculations. Every time he did so, his frustration went up a notch, and he'd begun to lose his patience rather quickly. Every single breathing exercise he could remember didn't seem to help much, even the second time around. He'd just started on the third round when he felt them enter the shop.

Stay calm, Skywalker, he told himself firmly. *One way or another, you have to stay calm.*

Then he heard Watto call him.

His somewhat calmed stomach suddenly decided to do flip-flops, and it took every single ounce of willpower that he had to not leave right then and there. Instead, he walked calmly into the front of the shop, not meeting anyone's eyes.

"*What took you so long?*" Watto asked in Huttese. Anakin didn't bother responding as he walked over to the counter and pushed himself up onto it. There wasn't a walk-space to the area behind the counter as the toydarian didn't need it, but Anakin still couldn't help but feel short and awkward despite the familiar actions. That was the last thing he wanted to be in front of *her.* Groaning inwardly, he clamped down on his nervousness even more. "*Just mind the shop*," Watto growled, then turned a smile back to Qui-Gon.

"So, leta me take you outa back, huh. We'll find whata you need, eh?"

Anakin swallowed, forcing himself to watch them go. Just before they left, Qui-Gon reached out and took something from Jar-Jar.

"Don't touch anything," he warned, just a touch of annoyance in his voice. Anakin almost smiled. Almost. The man he remembered had been everything he'd aspired to be and knowing that the clumsy

Gungan could get on his nerves made him seem slightly more human. He noted when Jar-Jar stuck his rather impressive tongue out at the retreating Jedi Master's back and had no doubt that Qui-Gon knew about the rude gesture, but he didn't acknowledge it. Instead, he simply followed the toydarian up the stairs and into the back. Typical Jedi. He could already see where Obi-Wan got a lot of his mannerisms. His eyes turned to Artoo as the astromech followed Qui-Gon awkwardly up the stairs.

He'd missed the droid too.

As he and the other two beings were left behind, Anakin felt his heartbeat grow and his stomach drop to his ankles. He needed something to do to keep his mind off of *her*, so he kept his eyes on Jar-Jar, allowing him to get far too close to some of the goods than he probably should. He'd been too distracted the first time to try and keep the awkward being away from the shelves in the shop. Now he almost hoped for a distraction, a mess to clean up, *anything.* Of course, it would be his luck that Jar Jar seemed to have momentarily taken the older Jedi's words to heart and didn't touch anything. It wouldn't last, Anakin knew, but still.

Finally, he couldn't stand it anymore, and stole a glance out of the corner of his eye. She wasn't looking at him – thank the Force, because he almost stopped breathing. She looked every bit as beautiful as he remembered.

"My Angel… " he whispered, feeling that deep, stabbing pain in his heart that came back whenever he thought of her.

"Excuse me?" she asked turning to him.

For the second time that day, he almost panicked. Her brown eyes focused on his and he suddenly found it very difficult to talk. The dreary atmosphere of the front shop did nothing to distract from her beauty, quite the opposite actually.

"Angels," he finally admitted awkwardly, knowing he had to say something. "You appear to be one. That is all." That had been along the lines of the first thing he'd said to her anyway, hadn't it?

"A what?"

He just wanted to get lost in those eyes and stay there forever. "An Angel," he heard himself say, then struggled for an explanation. All he could remember was that they were beautiful because he'd always

equated them with his wife. Where had he heard about them originally? Probably from some bar somewhere. "The most beautiful creatures in the universe."

He could tell she was flattered, and it gave him just a little more courage.

"I've never heard of them," she said, walking forward, amusement on her face. It contrasted greatly with the last memory he had of her.

Stop, stop now. Come back! I love you!

Guiltily, he looked down. "Oh."

She giggled at his reaction. "Thank you," she said after a moment. "You're a cute little boy." Ugh. He most certainly did *not* want to hear those words from her. "How do you know about these angels then?"

Thankfully, his hands had found something on the desk to fiddle with because they would be shaking otherwise. "I listen," he said softly.

"Listen?"

He shrugged. "Traders and deep space pilots come through here on a regular basis. They discuss many things." It took him a moment to realize what he'd just said, and he almost slapped himself. No nine-year-old would say that!

"I see," she nodded. Even that little movement captivated him. "So what do you do around here?" she asked, looking around. He swallowed hard. Why had she looked away? Had he made her uncomfortable?

"Mainly I fix stuff up." Oh how he loathed reverting to such a childish way of speaking. He hoped it didn't sound too awkward. "Sometimes I mind the shop. Sometimes I race."

"Race?" she asked, turning to look back at him. "Race what?"

"Pods."

"You can pilot?"

He nodded. Those had been his three main duties as a 'gifted' child slave. "For as long as I can remember," he said softly.

"How long have you been here?" she asked, her voice even kinder.

She'd apparently sensed a touch of pain from his words. He blamed his lack of control on his young, underdeveloped body. It bothered him that he'd need to work on that *again*. Still, she'd always been able to read him rather well and honestly, he hadn't kept much from her until there at the end. Despite the disastrous side effects, he almost wanted to blurt everything out to her right now.

Then he berated himself again. Should he even be chancing talking to her? What had he said the first time? He couldn't remember much apart from the 'angel' comment, and that she'd found out he was a slave.

"Since I was three," he replied, mentally debating whether he should tell her of his slave status. He couldn't even recall her reaction, except that she'd accepted him as a human being instead of property. That had been one of many reasons why he'd been drawn to her to begin with.

"You've worked here since you were three?"

He shrugged. "My mother and I were initially sold to Gardulla the Hutt, but she lost us betting." Well, he remembered that much. Not that he wanted to. Even into his Jedi Knight years, he'd had scars across his back from his time under that… *thing's* ownership.

And there was the anger again. He quickly squashed it down, unwilling to even tolerate the idea of letting such emotions loose in front of Padmé again.

"You're a slave?" she asked, carefully schooling her expression. He knew her too well, though. She couldn't truly disguise the disgust in her voice. A stab of pain wrenched through his heart again. Had that been her reaction the first time? Had he just not known her well enough to see?

"Yes," he said, looking up to meet her eyes. The disgust changed to sympathy. He didn't know which one was worse.

"I do not need your pity," he heard himself say rather forcefully. "One day, we will be free."

She smiled, looking impressed, and a touch of his heart that had almost died at her reaction suddenly came alive again. "I'm sure you will," she said softly. "I'm sorry, I don't fully understand. This is a strange place to me."

In other words, she didn't want to tread on dangerous ground and had decided to backtrack. She understood well enough. Still, he appreciated the gesture. He wouldn't have been able to see it for what it was the first time around. Actually, he probably wouldn't have even after he'd married her in his previous life.

A clanging drew both of their attention to Jar-Jar, who had tripped over who knew what as he chased a droid he'd accidentally activated. He saw Padmé smile out of the corner of his eye, and decided to let the spectacle continue for just a moment until Jar-Jar had it by the neck, suspended above the ground.

"The nose," he said finally. Jar-Jar turned to look at him in confusion. "Tap the nose." He'd forgotten how utterly trying the Gungan could be.

"Oh," Jar-Jar said, following instructions, and studying the droid as it deactivated. The shop fell into silence for a moment, but Anakin knew it wouldn't last long.

"So you live with your mother?" Padmé asked, still watching Jar-Jar with amusement.

"Yes," Anakin replied.

"What's she like?"

Had she asked this many questions the first time around? Politicians. Still, he saw no harm in answering. "She's amazing. I cannot stress enough how strong she is and she always looks after me. I never could understand how she always puts my needs ahead of hers. I love her more than almost anything."

"Almost?" Padmé asked with a smile.

Anakin had to force his own smile to match. It had been a very long time since he'd had much need for something so frivolous as laughter, and it had been a long time since he'd had to worry about expressions at all. That had to factor into his lack of self control as well.

"So why are you here?" he decided to turn the tables and start asking the questions. He already knew the answer, of course, but it would be a much more comfortable (and probably safer) subject.

She accepted the change of topic with her normal grace. "Our ship was damaged and we had to come here to replace some parts."

Something occurred to him at that. "Did you come to this shop first?"

She shrugged slightly, looking over at Jar-Jar who had begun to inadvertently juggle several smaller objects that had somehow fallen on him. It would be a mess Anakin had to clean up, but Padmé still seemed to find it funny, so he was willing to let the Gungan be for now.

"Yes. Master Qui-Gon is in charge of finding what we need," she said, nodding towards the door where the Jedi and shop owner had disappeared. "He just came here first and I followed. Why do you ask?"

"Because I doubt any other shop around here has parts for a Nubian cruiser. It's just funny that he would have come here first." Either that or Jedi intuition.

Her face became slightly confused again as she regarded him. "How did you know we had a Nubian cruiser?" she asked.

He froze. Wonderful. Just how was he supposed to answer that? He looked around the dingy room for a moment, and was just about to open his mouth and explain that he'd simply overheard them talking earlier, when Qui-Gon walked through the door. The man didn't hide his irritation very well. Nowhere nearly as well as Obi-Wan had in Anakin's opinion.

The thought surprised him, but he didn't have much time to contemplate as the Jedi announced that they were leaving, then looked behind him at the Gungan, specifically calling his name to get his attention. In response, Jar-Jar promptly lost what little concentration he had, and fell over, parts and casings scattering everywhere.

Padmé backed away, flashing the brilliant smile that made him go weak in the knees. "I'm glad to have met you… what's your name?"

Oh, he'd forgotten to tell her.

"Anakin," he said, and for the first time in years, he smiled. Not just a forced, mask-like smile, but a deep, real one.

"Anakin," she repeated, and walked out, Jar-Jar on her heels. He felt so relieved that he hadn't botched his first meeting with her (too badly in any case) that he'd forgotten to reciprocate her farewell.

xXx

Watto let him go early that day. It had been one of the reasons Anakin had been glad the toydarian had won them instead of another slave master. After a particularly trying day, Watto usually just wanted to forget everything by grabbing a few drinks after he closed up the shop. On those days, he let Anakin go early with only one last task or two, just as he did that afternoon.

His mind still ran in swirling steps as he scrubbed the racks, moving objects, wiping and polishing the too-old metal and duraplast before replacing them and moving on. It was a mind-numbing task, but one that he felt particularly grateful for that night.

Before he realized it, he'd finished and let Watto know he was leaving. It had all passed by in a sort of daze, and he was struck, again, by how surreal the world seemed. That sensation had come to him more than once since he'd woken up in the past.

That was why, when he came across a certain Dug he only vaguely remembered disliking in the process of pulverizing Jar-Jar, he actually paused. Should he intervene? That had been how Qui-Gon had come to his house before after all, now that he recalled.

The rest of the little group faced the proceedings a few meters away. Padmé's expression tugged at him, hard. She looked worried and nervous… and how else would they be able to get their ship fixed? He knew how much her planet meant to her, and that was what tipped the scale of his decision.

"*You're picking a fight with an outlander*?" he asked calmly, amazed at how much Huttese he remembered. In the week he'd been back, he hadn't done much more than listen to Watto and the store's customers shout swear words and harsh phrases at him.

The Dug looked up at Anakin, his face suddenly gaining an expression that said 'fresh-meat', and dropped (threw, really) the Gungan.

"*Ready for the race, slave boy?"* he sneered. *"Or should I simply kill you now so you won't have to worry about it?*"

Ah yes, the race.

"*If you fear my threat that much, you can try,*" he challenged smugly. *"But you'll be using all of your winnings to make amends."* Slaves weren't cheap.

The Dug's face suddenly dropped into a scowl. "*Then I'll wait until the race, but your head will be mine*," he growled, and walked away.

The former Sith watched the other being leave and his false smile disappeared. The Dug represented the scum of the universe to him. He cared only for money and fame and didn't care who he stepped on to accomplish it. Just the thought brought back the old, familiar disgust and It took Anakin several seconds to calm down enough that he trusted himself to speak without losing control again. He still wanted to eliminate the Dug's pathetic existence but he managed to refrain.

The words of Master Yoda rang unbidden through his mind. *Once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny.* The old adage was certainly proving true now.

When he finally glanced up, he found himself looking into the face of a rather concerned Qui-Gon, who didn't seem to know quite what to say. Neither did Anakin. 'Oh hi there, I'm just calming myself down so I don't crush everything within a hundred meters to dust with the dark side,' probably wouldn't go over very well.

Interesting. He seemed to have rekindled some sarcastic sense of humor.

"Are you alright, young one?" the Jedi asked sincerely.

Anakin plastered a smile on his face. "Yes," he replied. "It isn't intelligent to approach a Dug," he shot an annoyed look at Jar-Jar. "They tend to be rather dangerous and easily provoked."

"But mesa hatin' crunchin'," the Gungan protested. "That's the last thing mesa wantin'."

Qui-Gon's eyes lingered on Anakin warily for several seconds before turning his attention to Jar-Jar. "Never the less, the boy is right. You are heading into trouble."

Padmé had come to stand beside them, and it took all of his control to keep his eyes on the Jedi Master.

"But – but… " the Gungan started.

"Thanks, my young friend," Qui-Gon said with a smile and a nod before turning to head back down the street.

"But mesa doin' not'in'!"

They began to walk away, and Anakin hesitated. This was it. Either he backed out now and let the universe take a completely new course, or he continued on. Once again, it was Padmé's smile that made up his mind.

"So, where are you headed?" he asked, hoping he didn't sound too graceless. It wasn't often that he found himself playing host.

"We're looking to get some food," Qui-Gon answered easily. "Would you know where to find some?"

Anakin nodded. "This way," he said, turning and striding down an adjoining street. The seemingly misfit group followed.

xXx

Qui-Gon didn't know what to think of the boy (Anakin, if he remembered correctly) who led them confidently through town. All he could tell was that this small child seemed to have an extremely high intellect along with an inner conflict he'd never seen in a person under the age of 30. Even many Jedi Masters didn't have those kinds of inner battles. Between the hesitations and almost fearful looks he'd shoot at everyone in the vicinity before speaking in a careful, paranoid manner, he reminded Qui-Gon more of a war veteran than of a young child. Even a slave. What must his past have been like? He couldn't be older than ten standard years.

On top of that, Qui-Gon could get no reading on the boy. He didn't just run into mental shields, it seemed more like he wasn't even there. That kind of shielding required a Force presence. A strong Force presence. And training. He had never heard of those kinds of shields used by an untrained being. He could only draw the conclusion that Anakin either had prior training, or he was some sort of genius. A genius with an extremely traumatic and possibly painful background. He wasn't sure if he should be wary or sympathetic.

Eventually they stopped at a run-down fruit stand set up in the shade of a dusty building. An old woman who seemed to have more wrinkles than skin on her tanned face grinned down at the boy.

"Ani! Welcome," she said in a well-used, jolly voice. "Haven't seen you around much lately."

"I apologize for not coming by," he replied.

"So serious, Ani?" she joked. "Want to make a good face in front of

your new friends?"

The boy glanced uneasily up at Qui-Gon. "Yes," he replied.

"And so formal? What's gotten into you?"

"Nothing," he insisted, his words just slightly harsh, almost as if he were giving a warning. She seemed a bit taken aback by his comment. "Sorry, Jira," he said in a softer tone. "It's been a long day."

"That's alright, Ani," she said, the grin easily back in place. "Now what'll you have?"

He looked over the produce for a few seconds before he pointed to a few of one particularly wrinkled fruit. "Four… pallies," he said, pausing before speaking the word, as if he'd forgotten it. Qui-Gon continued to watch their interaction, now thoroughly fascinated.

So the boy was acting differently? Qui-Gon would even go so far as to guess he had gone through a sort of character change recently. Why? Perhaps trauma? What kind of trauma? He didn't rule out beatings, but he did doubt it. If Anakin had gone through a change, then that was unlikely as abuse didn't often simply start up suddenly enough to cause such an obvious alteration.

The Jedi observed the child's precise movements. He almost seemed uncomfortable in his own body. He also moved quickly, probably expectant of punishment if he didn't move fast enough.

If Qui-Gon had to venture a guess, he'd say the boy was a slave. It would be the only reason for keeping a child like him around a shop like Watto's, no matter how good at mechanics.

Had he been sold recently? That could certainly be a change that might cause trauma. Or was it something else? He didn't know enough about the boy to make an educated guess, and would have to look deeper into it to gauge the child's situation correctly.

A slight tug through the Force brought his thoughts to Obi-Wan. Something had come up. He didn't often feel this kind of irritation from his padawan through their bond. He turned, looking around at the settlement, trying to get a better sense of what had happened.

"Master Qui-Gon?" Padmé's voice brought him out of reverie and he looked down at the young woman standing next to Anakin.

"Yes?" he asked, noticing the fruit being held out to him and taking it casually. "Thank you."

"Is something the matter?" she asked.

He smiled. Did she really think that she could fool him with a paltry disguise? Not with the way the current 'Queen' had deferred to her earlier. "Nothing you need to concern yourself over," he said, making sure to keep his tone light as he put the fruit into the bag he carried at his waist. He didn't miss the boy's eyes land and linger on his lightsaber. Did he know what it was? He wouldn't be the first, but few people on the outer rim knew an unlit lightsaber at first glance.

"Oh, my bones are aching," the woman said suddenly, looking around. "Storm's coming, Ani. You'd better get home, quick."

Was it just Qui-Gon, or did Anakin's smile seem forced? The boy nodded and bowed slightly, which seemed to surprise the old woman even more, and he turned to walk away.

"Follow me," he said shortly. A very terse little boy too, apparently.

"Where?" Qui-Gon asked.

Ani turned around, fixing him with a neutral face. "Do you have shelter?"

"We'll head back to our ship," the Jedi replied, unsure of whether Anakin really wanted to help or was just being polite.

There it was again, the pause before he spoke, as if he had to carefully calculate something before he said anything. "Where is your ship?" he asked.

"On the outskirts," Padmé replied.

"I doubt you'll make it in time," Ani said. "And the storm could be dangerous." He spoke that last line as if it should be obvious. "Come. You w – can stay with me."

The Jedi Master couldn't help but stare at the child. He'd known senators that didn't have that kind of a commanding presence. He'd said "can", but Qui-Gon felt sure he would have originally said "will". Used to giving commands, then.

This boy was becoming more and more of a puzzle. One that the Force

seemed to be pushing him to solve.

"Very well," he replied easily. "Please, lead on."

xXx

Qui-Gon suspected something. Anakin was sure of it, and he didn't know what to do about it. A lot of that would come from the fact that he didn't know what the Jedi had found so suspicious. He'd been so careful. Of course, Padmé's presence had caused him to slip up a few times… But what conclusion would he possibly draw?

Of course, then there was the old woman, saying he was acting differently. A comment like that would make any Jedi take a closer look. Anakin didn't know what Qui-Gon would find on closer inspection.

Perhaps this had not been the wisest course of action after all.

Too late. And he was not accustomed to dwelling on the past. Perhaps that had been his problem. He was now living in it after all.

The sandstorm had already blown in full-force by the time they reached his home. He keyed in the code to unlock the door quickly and led them inside, out of the tan-colored, smothering fog created from sand particles settling in eddies of wind near the buildings.

As he entered, he reached out for the calm, soothing presence of his mother, and felt himself relax for the first time all day.

"Mom?" he asked, brushing what he could get of the sand (oh, how he *hated* the substance) off of his shirt. "Mom, I'm home."

She walked out of the back room, wiping her hands on a towel. Did she ever stop working? Why did she have to live like that when she deserved so much more? She looked upon the visitors with surprise, then looked curiously at Anakin.

"Ani?" she asked.

He put on his best childlike face, and added a touch of whine to his voice. "They needed a place to stay. Can they stay? Please?" Funny, he always found it easier to act like a child around her.

"Hello," she said to the strangers, her smile welcoming and large, despite the sudden surprise.

"I'm Qui-Gon Jinn," the older Jedi introduced himself. "Your son was kind enough to offer us shelter."

She looked over them for a moment before breaking down and nodding. "Of course you can stay. I'll just need a little help with supper."

"Allow me," Qui-Gon offered, holding out a bag. "We brought some food."

His mother's smile gained more than a touch of relief. She'd been worrying about their supplies then.

"Thank you," she said, accepting the bag graciously before turning and walking into the kitchen. The Jedi followed her out of the room and Anakin watched them go, unsure of what to do now. He wasn't exactly good at making polite conversation, and the atmosphere felt thick enough to him to cut with a lightsaber.

"Don't touch that," he said to Jar-Jar, who was looking at a stack of boxes and parts piled next to the wall on one side of the entry way. The Gungan jumped back, snapping his hands behind him innocently. Really, who did he think he was fooling?

"Anakin, why don't you show them the droid you've been working on?" Shmi called from the kitchen.

Anakin could have kissed her. "Yes. Very well, this way," he said, leading them into the back.

Jedi vs. Sith?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Your son is quite the host," Qui-Gon commented, unable to keep the amusement from his voice as he began to set the table to Shmi's instructions.

The mother glanced over at her guest. "He has a large heart," she said softly, more than a hint of pride evident in her words. Yet he sensed something else too.

"You sound unsure," he said.

She looked up at him from where she'd been cutting a root of some kind. "No," she said firmly. "No, he's a good boy, kind and welcoming."

"But he's changed recently," he said it as more of a statement than a question.

She looked surprised at his words, then slowly looked down again, continuing to chop slowly as she nodded.

"About a week ago, he woke up from a nightmare. I've never seen him act so… lost and alone. He was convinced that I had died and that I was a ghost of some kind or other. Now he seems… older, more calloused and cynical but more disciplined."

Qui-Gon suddenly understood. Perhaps it had been a vision of some sort. He'd heard of visions that had changed Jedi; visions of the future and past, harsh battles or horrible acts. It would certainly explain a lot.

And if he were having visions now when he wasn't even trained… he'd have to test the boy to measure his Force potential.

Just as he finished setting the table, their lost Gungan walked into the room looking bored. Qui-Gon raised an eyebrow. A wandering Jar-Jar didn't strike him as very ideal.

"Jar-Jar," he said with a smile, folding his hands in front of him in what Obi-Wan called his 'Master Stance'. "I'm glad you came. We have some preparation we'd like you to help with." Shmi raised an eyebrow

at him, but said nothing as the Gungan agreed and walked over to her.

"Could you clean these off for me?" she asked with a smile, handing him an old bowl full of fruit and a towel. "Just wipe them down."

"'O course, mesa happy to help!"

Qui-Gon was about to ask if she needed anything else done when his comm went off. Excusing himself politely, he flipped the switch to 'receive' as he walked into the hall.

"Qui-Gon," he said.

"Master," Obi-Wan's voice came over the unit. "We just received an urgent message from Naboo. The Queen's councilor, Sio Bibble, just contacted us. He says they've cut off supplies and food from the cities and have started to move people to camps until the Queen returns. He asked her to contact him with instructions."

"It sounds like bait," Qui-Gon replied, "to establish a connection trace." He sensed agreement over their bond and felt just a touch of pride. His padawn had grown up. Obi-Wan had seen the ruse and told them not to send a reply, but he sensed something else from his padawan as well. He waited for a few moments and surely enough, his young ward continued.

"What if it is true and the people are dying?" Obi-Wan asked, sounding uncertain.

Qui-Gon repressed a sigh. He didn't want to think about it either. "Either way, we're running out of time," he responded. Then he waited a moment before ending the transmission and turned around to finish helping with supper.

xXx

The storm continued to rage outside, sand grains scraping loudly against the sides of the homes and buildings, wearing them down as best they could. Anakin focused on the sound, purposefully distracting himself from the dinner table conversation. He wished they could get off of their current subject, but Padmé had asked why they didn't just leave the planet to escape slavery.

"All slaves have a transmitter placed inside their body somewhere," his mother said as she poured more milk into Qui-Gon's cup. He'd insisted that once they left, all of the remaining food would stay with Shmi.

After a week of no rations from Watto, it had eased Shmi's worries a great deal.

The room fell into a short silence as Shmi let her statement process. Anakin didn't say anything.

"Any attempt to escape," she continued after her short pause, "And the transmitter will activate explosives." Anakin's fists clenched. He knew where his transmitter was: his left leg. Transmitters were commonly put into appendages. Activating one would stop a slave from running, allowing them to be caught again while minimizing damage and profit loss. Anakin had run across a few slaves that had tried to run. Their lives had gotten infinitely worse after their attempts.

Padmé looked down at her plate of food, a slightly green hue to her skin.

"I can't believe there's still slavery in the galaxy," she said, looking up as his mother sat down. "The Republic's anti-slavery laws – "

"The Republic doesn't exist out here," Shmi said, cutting her off kindly, but firmly. "We must survive on our own.

SLURP.

Jar-Jar's tongue disappeared inside his mouth, along with one of the fruits from the bowl in the middle of the table. Everyone turned to look at him. Anakin was not amused. Had the native Nubian really been this… irritating? Somehow he didn't remember him being quite this bad. He was reminded of several Imperial officers he hadn't been particularly impressed with, sadly enough.

Of course, just about everything seemed to irritate him at the moment. He entertained the idea of force-choking the Gungan and just being done with it before worried, blue eyes flashed through his mind and he repressed a sigh. Jar Jar got to live.

"'Scuse me," the Gungan mumbled sounding only slightly sheepish.

An awkward silence fell over the table. Anakin didn't bother to attempt to break it. He'd sat through far worse silences. A picture of Luke turning away from him to look out over the Endor moon came to his thoughts. *'That is why you won't take me to your Emperor now.'* Yes, that had probably been the most awkward, depressing conversation he'd ever had.

The memory also brought something else to mind.

"I saw your l… laser sword," he said slowly. He hadn't known the name of a lightsaber before he'd gone to the Jedi Temple and was secretly rather proud of himself for catching the potential mistake. Perhaps he was getting better at this.

"Anakin," Shmi rebuked.

Anakin looked down and the silence returned for a couple of moments before Jar-Jar whipped his tongue out again. This time Qui-Gon caught it.

"Don't do that again," he said before releasing the tongue. Then glanced over at Anakin, his expression challenging. "You did?"

"Are you a Jedi?" It felt strange to ask that somewhat earnestly. How many times had he posed the question, mocking his prey before striking them down with his own 'laser sword'? He tried not to remember.

"Perhaps I killed a Jedi and stole it from him."

Anakin actually snorted at that. "Not likely."

Qui-Gon raised an eyebrow. "Why do you say that?"

The former Sith fought down a triumphant smile. Right into his hands. But he still had to play up his 'childishness'. What was something that would sound younger… ? "You're too nice to kill anyone," he said matter-of-factly and mentally patted himself on the back. He'd wanted to tell the older Jedi that he just didn't have the constitution to go around killing people.

The Jedi eyed him for a few moments, and Anakin could see the gears turning in his head. Then he smiled sadly. "I wish that were true," he said.

The entire table turned and looked at him, askance. "You kill people?" Anakin asked, hoping he didn't sound too amused by the admission.

Qui-Gon sighed and shook his head. "Not if there is any other way. I fight for peace in the Republic."

This time, Anakin almost couldn't hide the snort. He may have abandoned the Sith ways, but that did not mean he didn't think the

Jedi weren't conceited snobs that distanced themselves from the universe for sake of their own hubris. That would be an opinion from his years as Vader that would not change. He'd known quite a few Jedi that did not fight for anything but themselves. Of course, those Jedi seemed to be the easiest to either turn or kill… or both.

Fortunately, he'd been in the process of putting a piece of food in his mouth. He covered the scoff with a semi-real coughing fit.

"Are you alright?" Padmé asked, placing a hand on his arm.

Anakin nodded, trying to ignore her touch. It didn't work very well. He still felt confused when it came to her, but it hadn't taken him long to realize that he could not see her that hurt again – especially by his hand. He'd come to the conclusion that her safety came before his feelings. He would just have to be content to watch her from a distance as he was unwilling to put her in danger again.

He swallowed the food and steeled his expression, looking back up at the older man. "You are a Jedi," he insisted after a moment.

Qui-Gon leaned into the back of the chair, studying at Anakin thoughtfully. "I can see there's no fooling you," he said, then leaned forward again, as if to tell a secret. "You mustn't let anyone know about us. We're on our way to Coruscant, the central system in the Republic, on a very important mission, and it must be kept secret."

"Then why are you out here?" he asked, grateful he'd gone over this scenario in his mind several times before coming to dinner (he'd been tired of getting caught by surprise simply because he didn't wish to think about the future). "Did you crash? You said your ship is in need of repair," he looked over at Padmé. "May I have a look at it? I'm good with mechanics, perhaps I can repair it." He felt like he'd given an entire speech. After so many years as a Sith, he'd gotten used to the idea that actions spoke louder than words, and had gotten to the point where he only spoke if he had to. That had been the case here, but it still seemed like a good deal of speech to him.

"I don't doubt it," Qui-Gon said with a smile. "But first we must acquire the parts we need."

"Wid no-nuttin mulah to trade," Jar-Jar added, looking over at Anakin with a slightly depressed shrug.

"These junk dealers must have a weakness," Padmé commented. He couldn't help but admire her tenacity and optimistic approach. Of

course, he always had.

"Gambling," his mother said immediately. "Everything around here revolves around betting on those awful races."

"Races?" Padmé asked. "What races?"

He couldn't have asked for a better opening. "Podracing," Anakin spoke up, then looked to Qui-Gon. "You've seen them?"

"They have podracing on Malastare," he replied as he put a fruit slice in his mouth. "Very fast, very dangerous."

"I can do it," Anakin said with more bravado than he'd intended. Well, it was true. He could still hear Obi-Wan's voice in the back of his mind telling him to stop being so arrogant. He almost rolled his eyes. And here he thought he'd shut that voice up long ago.

"Really?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Anakin!" Shmi said again, her voice raised.

"Podracing," the Jedi said thoughtfully, watching Padmé. "Greed can be a powerful ally," he continued.

Yes, he sounded exactly like a guardian of the galaxy there.

Seriously, where had he picked up this sarcastic line of thinking?

"I built a racer," he said, half to distract himself, half to push the conversation where it needed to go. "It is fast enough to win. There happens to be a large race tomorrow on Boonta Eve. I cannot enter my pod as a slave… " he let the comment hang, knowing the Jedi would pick up on it.

"Anakin," Shmi leaned forward, "Watto won't let you!"

He hated going against his mother like this. "He is unaware I have built it."

"You're suggesting that I enter your pod as mine," Qui-Gon said, eyes calculating.

"I don't want you to race! It's awful! I die every time Watto makes you do it," Shmi protested. She sounded reprimanding and desperate at the same time and it made Anakin almost not want to press the subject. Almost.

"They need the prize money."

"Anakin… " she said again, almost pleading. Force, it hurt to do this to her!

"Your mother's right," Qui-Gon conceded, but Anakin caught the gleam in his eye. He'd already decided to take Anakin's offer. Some Jedi. Had he actually wanted to be trained by this man? The Jedi turned to Shmi. "Is there anyone friendly to the Republic that could help us?"

Shmi stared at him for a few moments before shaking her head and looking down at her hands. "No."

Another heavy atmosphere fell over the table. "I'm sure Qui-Gon doesn't want to put your son in danger," Padmé said. "We'll find some other way."

"Mom," Anakin said, putting all of the feeling and emotion he could behind the childish words, "Please? I want to help." That much was true. He did want to help, if only for Padmé.

She sighed. "I know, Anakin. And you're right, there is no other way. I may not like it, but he can help you." She looked at her son with that soft smile that always told him she was proud of him, and for the second time that day, he smiled. Not a half-smile, or a forced smile, but a real, deep grin. He hadn't realized how good that felt. Then she glanced for just a moment at Qui-Gon. "He was meant to help you."

The Jedi still looked unsure, and Anakin wondered if he'd read the man correctly for just a moment.

"Very well," he said. Anakin noted Padmé's shocked (and rather horrified) expression, but she didn't say anything. He looked back up at his mother again. He could feel her fear for him, and she did little to hide her nervousness about the race, but he could also tell she was very proud of him.

He came to the conclusion in that moment that he would give up all of his Force abilities for her smile any day.

xXx

It didn't take long to convince Watto to let Anakin race. He did want to beat Qui-Gon within an centimeter of his life when he sweetened the deal for the toydarian. Watto had suggested a 50-50 split, for goodness sake! It took a moment for Anakin to see the Jedi's reasoning

(only take what they need and leave on somewhat decent terms, make sure that Watto didn't want to back out of the deal and/or give them a hard time so people wouldn't start asking questions, etc.), but he still felt like the Jedi was building himself into a corner.

Not that they'd have to worry as Anakin would win, but still.

The only question that remained to be seen was if Qui-Gon would secure Anakin's release. It would be unlikely that he would discover the consequences of the Jedi's actions until after he actually won. That's how it had been the first time. No doubt the older man would avoid telling him either way so as not to get Anakin's hopes up. Unfortunately, Anakin's little trip back in time had already changed several events in minor ways, and he was smart enough to realize that little instances could change much more significant instances. Would Qui-Gon see him as too dangerous this time? Or would he become convinced Anakin had to be a Jedi like the first time? Would winning free him as it had before?

For a moment, he considered outright asking Qui-Gon, but ultimately decided against it. If the Jedi freed him, then so be it. If not, then he would cross that bridge when he came to it. He wouldn't know until the time came, so he focused on the race, ignoring the pressure like the experienced pilot he was. It wasn't difficult until he realized just what kind of shape his pod was in.

For a nine-year-old, it had been a masterpiece. For Anakin with his current mental age and knowledge of mechanics… he wondered how he could have ever even gotten the thing to fly at all. He'd built it for speed over maneuverability, and ignored the fact that it tended stall (oh, how he remembered that). To top it all off, more than half of the parts looked like they'd been stuck together with some sort of adhesive instead of welded, although he knew that to not be true as he remembered doing all of the welding himself.

The fact that he'd won the first time with *this* had been nothing short of a miracle. Not the miracle that one works towards, but the kind of miracle brought about by the Force itself. He couldn't explain it any other way. Well, his piloting skills may have had something to do with it.

Anakin spent most of the evening trying to fix the pod up and undo the damage his younger self had done to the piece of junk he'd managed to clabber together. It reminded him of the ship the Princess and the smuggler insisted on flying around.

That thought caused him to shudder.

"Hi Ani!" several voices behind him intoned. He blinked, slightly annoyed at the interruption and turned to meet the faces of his fellow slaves. For a moment, his own face remained blank as he tried to place names to each of them. These had been his playmates before he'd left. They were also the people he had vowed to free… and hadn't. How could he have forgotten them? A stab of guilt shot through his chest, but he pushed it aside with practiced ease.

"Hello," he responded. He got a few strange looks, but the children seemed to be distracted by the pod.

Noticing Padmé's interest in the newcomers, he straightened. He'd been trying to ignore her all day with only marginal success. He didn't want to scare her away or have her think he had a stupid crush. No, his feelings went far deeper than that, which was why he became even more determined to ignore her. However, to do so at the expense of manners would draw unwelcome attention to him, and possibly point out uncharacteristic traits. He'd already done enough of that.

"Padmé," he said, forcing his voice to remain calm and unwavering (it was far harder than it should have been without the vocoder), "Jar-Jar, these are my friends." He couldn't remember their names, and wasn't going to try. It was painful enough to remember their faces.

Artoo chattered at him, upset at being left out.

"And Artoo," he said, relaxing just a hint.

"A real astrodroid?" one child practically yelled. This had been his best friend, hadn't it? How sad was it that he couldn't remember? "How do you get so lucky?"

There's no such thing as luck, he wanted to say, but kept his mouth shut and shrugged.

"Are you ever going to get this done?" the older girl asked, gesturing to the pod.

"I have to have it done before the race tomorrow," he replied, grateful for a reason to return to his work again.

The children fell into a shocked silence. "You're going to be in the Boonta Eve race tomorrow?"

"With this?" the dark haired boy asked, motioning to the gray and blue painted pod and scattering of parts.

"Unfortunately," Anakin muttered. That also earned him some strange looks. He swore mentally. Was he really that out of character that even these oblivious children could see it?

"*You're such a joker, Ani*," the Rodian boy said in Huttese with a chuckle.

"You've been working on it for years," the older girl said disdainfully.

"It's never going to run," the younger one put in.

Slightly offended, Anakin opened his mouth to defend his skills, but the older boy beat him to it. "Come on, guys. Let's go play ball. Keep it up, Ani, you're going to be bug squash."

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. This was why he didn't get involved in arguments with children. Was that honestly the best the boy could do? Deciding it wasn't worth it, he returned to his work, only to see Jar-Jar ahead, near the energy couplings.

"Jar-Jar," he said, only loud enough to be heard. "Get away from there. You'll damage the pod," he paused a moment. "And you'll get hurt." He added the afterthought once he realized that that was what his younger self would do.

The Gungan ended up getting his head stuck between the beams, and came away with a limp tongue. He was lucky he hadn't been killed. If that beam had gone through his brain…

How had he survived for as long as he had?

He was still fiddling around with something near the engines with Padmé when the dark-haired boy who had decided to stick around spoke up again.

"But you don't even know if this thing will run."

"It will," Anakin said nonchalantly as he climbed into the seat.

"I think it's about time we found out for sure," Qui-Gon said, coming up behind him, small, black device in hand. "Use this power charge."

Anakin nodded his thanks, and inserted the charge into the correct slot, waiting a few moments for everyone to clear away before he

pressed the start switch. He had to push it up a few times before the engines caught, but once they did, he couldn't help but shoot a triumphant smirk at his childhood friend, who looked rather impressed.

A nudge through the Force had him glancing back at his mother, who seemed to be forcing a smile. Her feelings broadcast through the Force, telling of her conflict of hope battling with loss. Had she known this early that the Jedi would take him away? Had she really wanted him to leave this life behind that badly?

He almost berated himself for the stupid question. Of course she did. At that moment, it hit him just how much she really loved him. It wasn't difficult to see that she did not want to let him go.

The realization gave him a lot to think about.

xXx

Somehow, Qui-Gon cornered him that night to supposedly 'clean his wound'. While working on the pod, Jar-Jar had knocked into him, causing him to slip and injure himself. He'd taken care of it earlier, but the Jedi insisted on looking at it.

Anakin knew what the man really wanted; to test his midichlorian level.

After a night of ducking and dodging, he finally gave in and let the man check the wound just before he crawled into bed. Anakin watched with a wary eye as the Jedi removed the primitive bandage most slaves used and re-cleaned the wound with a bacta swab.

Qui-Gon noticed his displeased scowl.

"You don't trust me," he stated calmly.

Anakin didn't meet the other man's eyes. "I… don't know."

"You've come across people like me before, haven't you?"

The pause turned into a long silence as Anakin contemplated the different responses he could give. He would like to say 'no', as it would be the simplest answer and he would prefer to avoid uncomfortable questions, but the Jedi would know that was a lie. So what should he tell him? That he ran into a Sith? Somehow, he doubted that would end well. Besides, if he had run into a Sith and gotten training, he

wouldn't be here now. The darksider most likely would have taken him by force. They'd been known to do that. He'd done so himself.

Then he remembered a tip from Obi-Wan: answer a question with a question. It hides more than you might realize.

"How did you know?" he asked finally.

Qui-Gon's attitude remained infuriatingly calm. Honestly, Obi-Wan had nothing on this guy when it came to just being irritating. "I can tell you have a Force presence because I don't sense one there at all. That requires training with mental shields. A piece of advice for the future, if you want to shield yourself from a Jedi, at least give yourself a Force presence."

Anakin stared at the older man, finding himself impressed with the other for the first time. Mace Windu had a hard time finding or sensing him when he was trying to hide his presence. Of course, Palpatine and Yoda had always seemed to know where to find him. He'd never figured out exactly how.

"Oh," he said, this time watching as Qui-Gon slipped the small disk across his cut, taking that ever so important sample of blood. He didn't so much as wince at the slight prick.

At least he knew that within the next day he'd be freed and on his way to Coruscant. There would be no way the Jedi would leave him behind once he confirmed Anakin's midichlorian count. He found it ironic that the thought depressed him. He'd always hated Coruscant.

"Who was it?"

The words had more weight than Anakin should realize at his age, genius or not, but he caught it just the same. If he refused to answer, Qui-Gon would immediately suspect a dark-side user, and he'd just be under that much more scrutiny from the Jedi Council. After all, he had no doubts Qui-Gon would tell them everything. Would that help or hurt his chances of getting into the temple though?

Knowing the Jedi, it would hurt. Better stay safe.

"I met an old man," he said, trying to ignore the irony. "He traveled through town and stayed for a few months a while back. He always dropped by the shop asking questions, buying parts. I think he was stranded here too."

"What was his name?"

"He wouldn't tell me."

"What did he look like?"

These questions were getting old fast. The fact that he was making this up on the fly didn't help, but then he always had been better at improvising. "He wore robes like you, but darker. He had gray hair and a laser sword like you. He said he couldn't do anything to help me then, but he could teach me to protect myself, so other people wouldn't find me."

Qui-Gon raised an eyebrow, apparently finding that information interesting. "Why wouldn't he want people to find you?"

Anakin shrugged. "He said there were bad people out there who could find me and hurt me."

"So he taught you how to shield your mind?"

"Yes," Anakin responded, looking out the window, hoping he seemed wistful. "He told me about the Force, and that he could feel me through it. He showed me how to touch it and use it to block my mind."

"Really?" Anakin tried not to wince at Qui-Gon's blank tone of voice. He wasn't buying it. "How long did he stay?"

"Several months. He'd only teach me when I was in the shop, though. Said he didn't want to worry my mother."

A slight silence fell over the room. "If you don't trust me, is it because you think I'm a Dark Jedi?" Qui-Gon finally asked.

Anakin looked up at him for a few moments debating the answers once again in his mind, then shrugged and looked down. "No."

"Is that why you're willing to put your life on the line to help me?"

This was *really* starting to get uncomfortable. "You needed help," he said simply, hoping it would be enough.

Qui-Gon watched him for several more seconds, finishing up the bandage. "You did a good job taking care of this," he said.

What was he supposed to say to that? Thanks? "My mom taught me,"

he replied.

"She must be very skilled."

Anakin felt the sides of his mouth twitch up slightly. "She is." It felt so good to say that in present tense.

"Well, you should get some sleep. You'll need your rest tomorrow," Qui-Gon grinned down at Anakin and stood up.

"Yes," Anakin nodded in agreement. "But first, why did you take a blood sample?"

Qui-Gon looked impressed. "It's to check for infections. Now get some sleep."

Anakin's expression darkened. More Jedi lies. He shouldn't be surprised. Really. For people who claimed to be on the 'light side', they did an awful lot of 'shady' dealings.

"Good night, Anakin," the Jedi said as he shut the door.

"Good night," he replied crisply.

He lay in his bed, in the dark for a long time, thinking.

Did the Jedi really think they were any better than the Sith just because they killed, lied, and dealt under the table in the name of justice and peace? Did they honestly feel that superior? That the general rules of sapience didn't apply to them? For the first time since he'd woken up in the past, he dredged up his memories of the Jedi he remembered and couldn't help the disgust that rose with them. He felt the familiar pull of the dark side stir in the back of his mind, almost as if it had been waiting for these negative thoughts. It whispered and wound its way around his soul, taunting, teasing and promising power, and for the first time since he'd come back, he considered giving in.

The Jedi were a corrupt, stagnant order that insisted on getting things done their way no matter what the Force wanted. Take out the 'stagnant' part, and he had the Sith. Were they that different? Really?

The Old Jedi Order was not.

The Jedi after the Empire, though… His thoughts drifted back to Luke, so insistent and straight forward; so blindingly light in the Force.

Almost like a balm on a wound, those very memories soothed his soul and the dark pull lessened again. He breathed a sigh of relief into the silence of his room. Somehow, he felt as if he'd just escaped one of the strangling vines of Corrossar.

The future Jedi could be better. But the current Jedi… Even after all this time, and after everything he had done, he still had a great deal of anger to direct at the Jedi Order. He wondered if he would be able to change that – or if he even *should* – as his feelings were not unjustified. If he wanted to keep his promise to his son, though, then he would have to do something. He'd have to try and look at this from a different angle.

It wasn't easy. He'd been looking at the world from the same, dark angle for decades. But he used to be able to think outside the box and see things in different lights. How would Luke look at this?

After a few seconds, a new thought finally occurred to him. Maybe he was going about this all wrong.

For as long as he could remember, it had been Jedi vs. Sith, or Good vs. Evil, supposedly. But was it?

He'd embraced both sides of the Force, and been embraced by each in return at one point or another in his life. Dark side vs. light side. Bogan vs. Ashla. Power vs. peace.

That was what it really came down to, wasn't it? The dark side held power, fast and easy, willing to obey your every command if you exercised your will over it, and far more addicting than spice or death sticks could ever dream of being. The light side held peace, harmony and the promise of something more if one had the patience and brains to look for it.

So why had the Jedi acted as they had? Had they just grown complacent in their position? Or had they finally gotten corrupted enough to fall to the weakness of sapience? Power and greed and hubris… Perhaps they really had been planning to overthrow the Republic.

Stop it, Skywalker, he almost hissed to himself, freezing that thought in its tracks. Here he was, falling into the same habits yet again. He knew it would be difficult to escape his tendency to assume the worst, but if he had paused and actually thought about the whole situation rationally, even back when the Empire had just begun, he might have realized that there was no possible way the Jedi would have tried to

overthrow the Republic. Control it from the background? Maybe. Completely take over? No. And he'd been too blinded by hate and rage to see it. He'd been so blind for so long, and only now seemed to be able to look past all of those ingrained thought processes.

Of course, that idea brought up the question: if he'd been unable to see past his own perception for that long, what else had he missed? About the Sith and the Jedi and the Republic and the Rebellion… about himself?

About Obi-Wan. Had his old master really betrayed him?

Had Padmé?

Part of him wanted to shy away from the agonizing memories that brought up, but a part of him that had lain dormant for so long – the part that could *hope* – spurred him on.

Oh, the thoughts that had run through his head when he'd seen Obi-Wan on that ramp on Mustafar. Everything from the Jedi Master threatening Padmé, to them having an affair behind his back, and he hadn't known which one to believe.

Funny how quickly confusion could be turned into anger.

So, now that he was thinking somewhat clearly for the first time in almost 25 years, what had really happened on the most painful day of his former life? Did he even want to know? Really?

No, he didn't. But he also needed to. So he forced himself to remember that day in its entirety.

He'd gone to Palpatine to save Padmé. With hindsight, he could see that the soon-to-be Emperor had played him like a puppet for the first decade of their acquaintance. It disgusted him as to how easily he'd fallen for it. Even now, it almost boggled his mind that he couldn't see then what he'd later grown to *expect* from the man. While realization of his Master's true nature had not been a pleasant one, he'd grown to accept it as a fact of life. Palpatine manipulated. It was like saying planets orbited their stars.

Then he'd gone to the Jedi Council– who had been so desperate to stop the war and to find the Sith and destroy him… and Anakin hadn't let them, because he had thought he'd needed Palpatine. He'd put his needs above the entire galaxy, even after he'd seen the devastation the war – that Palpatine – caused.

He quickly moved past that thought. If he lingered, he wasn't sure he'd be able to resist the darkness again.

Then the pledge (that made him cringe), and then he'd gone to the temple and…

No. Moving past that too.

Then Mustafar and… more slaughter.

He'd been down this path before. Palpatine had set him up so well, and revisiting that knowledge had always allowed him his anger as a Sith.

And yet, his memories of Obi-Wan and Padmé seemed to hurt so much more? Why? Why had it been so much easier to conjure anger from their memories?

Would Padmé have brought Obi-Wan straight to Anakin? Maybe as backup? Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to remember her face. Her utter shock, fear and desperation. No. Obi-Wan had to have sneaked aboard her ship. He could see that now. It was the only explanation for her reactions. The Jedi Master had needed to find Anakin, and knew of "a" relationship between Anakin and Padmé, so he'd confronted her, found out about her pregnancy, put two and two together, and tricked her into coming after him.

A flare of anger surged through him at the thought of Obi-Wan doing that to Padmé, but he refused to acknowledge it and the darkness that came with it. He also felt an immense relief with the thought that Padmé had most likely not betrayed him at all.

So Obi-Wan had tricked his wife, stowed away, and gone to kill him.

So why hadn't he ended it there? He could have. As a Jedi, he should have.

You were my brother Anakin, I loved you! Those words Anakin had dismissed for so long as a vain attempt to break his will now rang through his head.

Obi-Wan had left him to burn… but he hadn't killed Anakin. He could always remember that pained face. The sheer agony he'd felt at the time seared it into his brain, even as he'd screamed out how much he hated his former master; his best friend. He'd thought that it was Obi-Wan trying to guilt him or torture him or just releasing his own

frustration that the Jedi's plan hadn't gone according to plan, but now… ?

"He couldn't do it… " Anakin muttered out loud, the revelation robbing him of every single trace of anger. He could only lay there on his bed, feeling exposed and empty without the familiar emotion.

For the first time, he found he could put himself in Obi-Wan's shoes.

What if Obi-Wan had been the one to turn instead of him? What would he have done had he walked into the temple and seen even the children slaughtered mercilessly? Anakin would have flown into a rage bent on revenge… until he found it had been Obi-Wan.

The very idea seemed so ludicrous, even now, that he had a hard time picturing it. Which meant he undoubtedly would have gone into shock in that kind of a situation. Had Obi-Wan gone into shock when he'd learned? Had he denied it, or accepted the revelation immediately?

In his master's position, Anakin's first thought would have been to hear Obi-Wan's side. And hadn't that been one of Obi-Wan's most desperate questions? '*Why?' 'How could you?'*

In Obi-Wan's place, he would have desperately tried to meet up with anyone else after the clones had tried to kill him. What if he'd come across another Jedi? A fellow council member, perhaps? Yoda hadn't been at the Temple, and he'd attacked Sidious later that night. Oh. That… that made sense.

So, Obi-Wan and Yoda had likely met up, and Yoda would have undoubtedly ordered the rogue's death… Had that rogue been Obi-Wan, could Anakin have done it? Could Anakin have, as a Jedi, killed his former master? It was hard to think past the hate and anger he'd stored and directed against the man, but he remembered – allowed himself to remember now – the banter and the trust and the… the love.

Anakin had hunted down Dark Jedi before he'd fallen, but they weren't Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan had been family.

At least until that fight. Anakin felt nauseous. Who had been the real betrayer?

Logic had never been his strong suit, but he wasn't half bad with it

either – out of sheer necessity (he never would have lasted in Palpatine's court without it). He found himself wishing he wasn't somewhat competent with it at that moment.

It took him a long time to finally sleep that night.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Lots of additions to the last scene here. It needed some smoothing out. Thanks again to Khalthalr for helping me!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Padme couldn't help but grin as the slow animals—eeopies, if she recalled right—sauntered from the slave district to the main hanger of the Raceway. The eeopies had an even gait that seemed both bumpy and smooth at the same time. She thoroughly enjoyed the ride and felt just a touch of disappointment when the short trip ended. She'd always loved animals, but had never had time for them, not even a pet.

Once they entered the dingy space, she couldn't hold another smile back as Anakin directed it to kneel down. She wondered if this boy was really as knowledgeable as he seemed about everything so strange to her. Had he been born handling animals like this too? She didn't envy his life. On the contrary, the very idea tended to twist her stomach in knots, but she did feel just the slightest tinge of jealousy for the idea of being able to be around animals like that.

"Bonapa keesa pateeso, o wanna meetee chobodd," a harsh voice drew her attention, and she looked up to see the blue slave owner with his gaze directed at Anakin. He then turned and flew out towards the stands with a chuckle, leaving them to stare after him. The boy, who had already been rather stiff all morning (whenever she came near he seemed to do that, now that she thought about it) straightened even more and shot a pointed look at the figure standing a few meters away.

Qui-gon had apparently gotten there early, probably to ensure their place in the race. It struck Padme for a moment just how out of place he seemed in the greasy, work-shop environment, even dressed as a poor local. Something about him and his padawan just radiated serenity. If she didn't know any better, she'd think Anakin had a similar presence. Similar, but very different too. It puzzled her.

"I'll tell you later," Qui-gon said to their unspoken question as he helped Anakin's mother down from her own mount and the others made to slide down from the saddles. Anakin immediately went over to the engines and began to work on them. She found herself surprised (and more than a little grateful) at his dedication. It made him seem a little cold, and kind of stand-offish, but she could tell that he

genuinely wanted to help them.

Kitster, Anakin's dark-haired friend, followed him to the engines and watched him work for a few moments, bouncing in excitement.

"This is so wizard, Ani! I'm sure you'll do it this time!"

Padme blinked. "Do what?"

The dark-haired boy looked up at her as if the answer should be obvious. "Finish the race, of course."

The floor dropped out from under her, and the slight flutter in her stomach turned into a hurricane. She turned an incredulous face to the sandy-haired boy. "You've never won a race?" she asked, unable to keep the accusation out of her tone.

Anakin flinched. "No."

"Not even finished?"

"No."

"But-"

"I'll win, Padme," he said softly. His words held such certainty, that she had to stop and think for a minute. And there was something about how he said her name...

"Of course you will," Qui-gon said as he came over and put his hands on Anakin's shoulders. The boy looked slightly uncomfortable at the touch. Maybe it wasn't just her then.

She couldn't help but stare incredulously at both of them, gaze switching from one to the other as she processed the implications. Her people's *lives* were at risk, and here they were betting on a racer who hadn't even finished a race, let alone won?

She would be having words with Qui-gon later, and they would not be pleasant for the Jedi. Weren't they supposed to be serene guardians? Why did she have to end up with the reckless gambler?

xXx

It was customary for a racer to wave once the Announcer introduced them. Anakin didn't even bother to pay attention, too focused on setting up his pod and checking it over for anything that might have

gotten damaged in the transfer from his home to the arena.

He sensed his mother coming up to him before she spoke and turned to face her as she knelt before him, sunlight glinting off of her hair. "Be safe," she said softly.

"I will. I promise," he responded, allowing her to hug him.

She looked at him one final time, as if to beg him to back out just once more, but didn't say anything and stood to walk away.

"Mom," he said. She turned around. "I love you, and I'll see you soon." Anakin felt a touch of shock at just how much he meant those words. He really would do almost anything for her. She blinked at him for several seconds before the large grin split her tanned face.

"I love you too, Anakin."

He smiled back and went back to prepping his pod. After that, just about everyone from the ship came up and wished him luck. Padme even kissed him on the cheek. That simple act made him feel like he could take on the entire Imperial army alone, like it always did.

"You won't walk away from this one, scum," a new voice spoke in Huttese and he turned to see the Dug he'd saved Jar Jar from the day before. "You're bantha poodoo."

Anakin stared at him for a moment. So this was what he'd had to put up with as a child? The rest of his life made this seem like a calm, Nubian afternoon.

"We'll see," he said back in Basic, a confident smirk finding his lips.

He got the slightest twinge of warning from the Force as Sebulba walked away, but before he could do anything about it, the announcer told the racers to get ready. Glancing uneasily around, he tried to ignore the feeling, hoping he could deal with it when the time came. He had the first time, after all. That is, if nothing had changed already, although he couldn't see what could have.

Qui-gon lifted him into his pod and Anakin tried not to glare up at him. He was fully capable of entering the pod on his own.

"Are you all set, Ani?" the Jedi asked, squatting beside the vehicle.

Anakin nodded.

"Remember, concentrate on the moment. Feel. Don't think. Trust your instincts." He had to fight another smirk. If only Qui-gon knew. "May the Force be with you."

He nodded again, not trusting himself to speak. Qui-gon accepted this, and stepped back and away as Anakin slipped his helmet on.

Then he did something he hadn't done in a long time. He closed his eyes and consciously reached for the Force.

xXx

To say that Qui-gon was surprised at Anakin's Force presence would be an understatement akin to calling a Hutt big-boned. The boy did not lower his shields once, but reached for the Force like a professional. A rusty professional, but a professional none the less.

He could not keep the surprise off of his face as he watched Anakin mentally prepare for the race. A lump of carbonite began to churn in his stomach, seeming to seep cold into the rest of his body. Just how much training did this random stranger give Anakin? And had he been a Jedi, or a Dark Jedi? Or worse yet, someone not affiliated or associated with the Jedi Order at all? There were rumors of other organizations that touched the Force in the Unknown Regions.

Yes, this would definitely be something he would have to take before the Council. He doubted they would be pleased to hear the news.

xXx

He'd forgotten how much he absolutely *loved* racing. As Vader, he'd often flown an advanced TIE-fighter on a semi-regular basis, but rarely did he actually do so for fun. Sith didn't do fun.

Yet another piece of his life that he'd traded away for power. Was he that attracted to the idea of control? He knew the answer, and it almost sickened him. Almost. Nothing so unpleasant could touch him when he raced.

He would concede that this wasn't supposed to be 'fun' either, but that didn't stop him from grinning from ear to ear as he dodged yet another stone obstacle. The only one who was putting up any resistance was, of course, the Dug (whose name he still couldn't remember). They'd both almost immediately left the others behind.

The TuskanRaiders' shots were the first real problems he encountered.

It took him a moment in his light Force trance to realize what was going on, and he had to smash down the pure rage that boiled up inside him. He still utterly loathed them, but he couldn't allow those thoughts at the moment for two very good reasons. One: He'd had his fill of the Dark Side. Two: He really needed to focus.

The Dug had used his momentary distraction to pull ahead, and tossed something back at his engines. Anakin felt a jab of warning through the Force and immediately raised his hand to change the object's course. His sudden release of the control lever knocked it down, causing him to veer off to the side. Cursing in Huttese, he slammed his hand back onto the handle, and took a deep breath, feeling for the Force again. It answered his call instantly, and he managed to avoid the giant rock-formations jutting out of the sand. If that had happened in the cave part of the race course, he wouldn't be here now.

Thanking the Force, he corrected his trajectory, and focused on the Dug who had taken first place. Anakin had fallen back a few places, but that didn't faze him. He'd catch up soon enough.

They passed their second lap with few serious obstacles. By the time the third lap came around, he'd caught up to the lead racer. The Dug was not happy. He'd tried flashing his vents, sent a few more objects back Anakin's way, and would ram into the human any time he even thought about passing.

Anakin still wasn't worried. *There is no emotion, there is the Force*, he told himself. Over their first drop in altitude, approaching Beggar's Canyon, he managed to quite literally speed over the other's head and gained the lead.

At that point, he knew he had the race in the bag. Or he would have, if, during the last leg of the lap, his engine hadn't caught fire. It brought back memories of the first race and a strange sense of deja-vu he'd been trying to ignore all week. Of course *now* he remembered having that little problem. It only took him a few moments to lock it down and transfer the fuel over, but those few moments cost him.

In the original timeline, the Dug had left him alone because his engine had been smoking with Anakin directly in front. The other racer had obviously written him off and gone on ahead instead of trying to sabotage Anakin's pod further. This time around, Anakin had just fixed the problem when the Dug came directly up behind him.

Warning flared in the Force, and Anakin swerved to the side, barely

avoiding a hit that would have undoubtedly knocked him off course and most likely killed him. Still unfazed, he pulled back onto the track, catching up to the larger racing pod easily.

He remembered how the race had ended originally now. The Dug had tried to knock him off course again, and their pods had locked together. Anakin had pulled away, leaving the alien behind. If it happened the same way this time, the other racer should survive.

'Should' being the operative word.

A voice inside his head that sounded suspiciously like Obi-wan told him that he shouldn't take the chance with the other's life. All life was precious, after all. Even a bullying Dug.

Anakin gave him a fairly wide berth as he pulled up next to the other racer and began to pass. The Dug would have none of it, and swerved over towards Anakin. He'd been expecting that. At the last moment he pulled back on his controls just slightly, and watched as the surprised alien blew past ahead of him, and far out of the course range.

Unable to help his grin, he punched both controls forward and shot towards the finish line, taking first place for the second time.

Will of the Force or not, he still loved winning.

He'd made quite a few people happy that day. Others...not so much. Many people of all species came down to congratulate and think him. Qui-gon even picked him up and carried him on his shoulders to the hangar. Despite his newly found mild disdain for the man, he realized he didn't mind as he waved reservedly at the cheering crowd.

How long had it been since so many people had been *grateful* to see him?

As good as winning felt, seeing so many grinning faces felt better.

xXx

All the pods had been returned to the hangar, awaiting their owners arrangements for transportation back to wherever they'd come from. Qui-gon had set him down for only a few seconds before Jar Jar picked him up and twirled him around.

"Good goin', Ani!"

He would never admit that he smiled at the Gungan's antics, even if it were just that once. No sooner had he been set on his feet again, than Padme grabbed him in a hug. He hoped she didn't notice as he stiffened, but after a few moments, he relaxed into what may very well be the only seriously close contact he had with her in this timeline.

"We owe you everything," she beamed at him and backed away as his mother knelt down, planting a kiss on his still very dirty cheek.

"It's so wonderful, Ani," she said through a giant grin. "You have brought hope to those who had none. I'm so very proud of you!" Her calloused fingers brushed through his hair and she kissed him again. He was sure any actual child in the universe would have backed away out of embarrassment, but he didn't. He only continued smiling as he hugged her back.

It had been a long time since he'd felt like this. Just...content to be. Somehow, he didn't think that had as much to do with winning as it did with being able to help those who had counted on him.

Of course, the racing part helped too.

xXx

Anakin's slave friends had wanted to celebrate. He took the time to memorize their names as they walked to the nearest store, vowing silently to come back for them this time. They all pitched in to get him his supposedly favorite drink as Qui-gon took the hyperdrive to the ship.

Of course then Greedo, a friend of Wald's, had to accuse him of cheating. He'd punched the other boy in his previous life and gotten into a rather nasty fight. Now he just looked over at the green-skinned child with a neutral expression. Subconsciously, he placed his hands behind his back and walked up to him.

"You say I cheated?"

"Yes," Greedo accused.

"How?"

"I don't know, but there's no way a human, let alone a boy, could ever win without cheating..." As Anakin approached, the boy backed down, deflating.

"I did nothing of the sort," he said calmly. "And unless you have proof, I suggest you keep your comments to yourself."

Greedo blinked for a moment. Then Anakin saw him ball his fists. "You don't scare me!" he yelled and went to throw a punch.

His fist got stopped by a much larger one.

"What is going on here?" Qui-gon asked, eyeing the two boys disapprovingly.

"He accused me of cheating," Anakin said in a cool voice.

"Did you?"

Anakin saw what he was doing, and had to stop himself from rolling his eyes. Obi-wan would have handled it differently and—dare he think it?—better.

"No."

Qui-gon turned to the Rodian."Do you think he did?"

"Yes!"

Before Qui-gon could open his mouth, Anakin cut in. "I know the truth, and you have no proof. Good day."

Surprisingly, the situation hadn't angered him as much as he thought it should, but he had felt rather hurt by Greedo's words. Hadn't they all been friends?

He passed Kitster on his way and paused, turning to look at him. He hadn't done that before, and had regretted not saying goodbye to his best friend. Not knowing exactly what to say, he stood there for several seconds before smiling.

"You always supported me, even when you didn't believe. Thank you."

"Y-you're welcome," Kitster said, taken back with Anakin's words.

Without another word, Anakin turned and strode off, Qui-gon at his side.

xXx

The suns had long-since begun their decent to the horizion by the time

Anakin and Qui-gon walked back towards the Skywalker residence. They'd stopped at Watto's shop for the last time before they left so Qui-gon could pick up the controller to Anakin's slave transmitter. He overheard them discussing releasing Shmi for the price the pod had been sold for (apparently Qui-gon had sold it earlier). Watto would have none of it, naming an insanely high price and then telling the Jedi to leave and never come back.

Anakin felt a little of the animosity towards the older man die down a little. He really had tried to free them both. He greatly appreciated the effort.

As they walked back to the house, Qui-gon gave Anakin the money. "This is yours."

They walked along in silence for another few seconds.

"Thank you," Anakin said softly.

"For what?" Qui-gon asked, feigning innocence.

Anakin shook his head. "For trying to free my mother."

Qui-gon looked up thoughtfully. Anakin got the feeling that he'd be seeing that expression on the other's face often.

"You're more than welcome, my young friend."

Palming the door open, he walked inside and up to his mother's desk where he placed the currency on the table. His mother looked over at him, and then down at the pile, and her eyes widened.

"Where did you get this?" she asked.

"Qui-gon sold the pod," Anakin said softly. "It's...not enough to free you, but it could go towards it one day."

"Free me?" she looked back up at him questioningly.

Qui-gon chuckled. "It seems you've discovered my surprise."

Shmi turned her gaze on him. "Surprise?"

"Anakin is free."

He tried to ignore the bitter taste in his mouth at those words, he really did. The truth was he'd never really been free. He'd always had

a "master". Maybe that's why he'd rebelled against Obi-wan so much. The Emperor wouldn't put up with it, or he probably would have been just as defiant.

Shmi gasped and put her hands to her mouth. It took her a few seconds to get her bearings before she looked down sadly. Anakin dropped his own head, not looking up.

"Will you take him with you? Is he to become a Jedi?"

And he had to hide a wince.

"Yes," Qui-gon said softly, folding his hands in front of him. "Our meeting was not a coincidence. Nothing happens by accident."

That little war he'd sensed inside his mother the previous day suddenly exploded. She did not want him to go, but she desperately did not want him to stay. Both emotions battled inside her, and a touch of depression laced it all.

She'd already made the decision to let him go if he wanted.

The problem was, at the moment, he wanted nothing more than to just stay there and live out his days in peace. But he knew he'd regret that choice in the future. That didn't exactly encourage him to hurry his decision along. He remained silent, staring at the desktop.

"Anakin," Qui-gon said finally. "I know you've had some training before, and I know you don't trust Jedi, but I do feel that the Jedi could help you." Anakin had to swallow a scoff. "I know you don't want to leave your mother, and I won't lie and tell you that training to become a Jedi will be easy. It requires dedication and sacrifice. It's a hard life."

Didn't he know it.

Finally he managed to drag his eyes to his mother's sad face. "Mom?"

"Anakin," she said softly. "This path has been placed before you. The choice is yours alone."

"You don't want me to go."

She blinked and looked down again, afraid to meet his eyes. "I don't want you to be a slave. You were meant for so much more...and that is my wish for you: To have a better life than I could."

He nodded.

"What is your decision?" Qui-gon said it in a kind tone that wasn't meant to be judgmental, but Anakin still resented it. He'd only just gotten his mother back, and now they were asking him to give her up. Typical Jedi.

Looking up at her pleading eyes one final time, he let out a breath.

"Very well," he said. "I will come with you."

He wished his heart didn't feel like it had broken all over again.

It didn't take him long to pack. He didn't have much to bring after all. As they left, he stopped in front of his mother one last time. She knelt down and gave him another hug, holding him as if she wished to never let go.

"I will miss you, Ani," she whispered.

He stepped back, looking at her intently. "No matter where I am, I will always be thinking of you, every day. When you miss me, know I'm missing you too. I will never forget. Ever. I promise."

That brought tears to her eyes and she hugged him one more time, planting a kiss on his cheek. "Oh, my Ani. I love you so much!"

"I love you too, mom," he said back. "I will see you again." He stayed there, holding onto her for several minutes. To his credit, Qui-gon did not interrupt, but seemed content to watch from a distance.

Finally, Anakin let go, turned and ran after Qui-gon. He didn't look back. He couldn't bare to see her standing there watching him leave.

Qui-gon said nothing.

xXx

The fact that he was having a hard time keeping up with the Jedi bothered him. Deeply. He could do better than this! Confound this pathetic, weak, non-mechanical and untrained body!

He wouldn't complain aloud. He wouldn't. The Jedi had already slowed down slightly for him, but once Anakin realized that, it only made him more frustrated, and he'd redouble his efforts.

They'd almost reached the ship when the Force screamed at him, and

he dove to the side, breathing heavily even as he yelled out to Qui-gon. At his warning, the Jedi whipped around. Hadn't the older man felt it? The dark presence?

Anakin knew this presence. He'd had to fight the clone often enough during his own Sith training.

Darth Maul.

It was in a Sith's nature to hate other Sith, and in this particular case, Anakin had no problem allowing that hatred for this man to flow. Of all of Sidious' apprentices, Maul had been the most physically advanced. Dooku had had the most skill all around, and Vader had had the most raw power in the Force.

As Vader, he couldn't push his mechanical body to further limits. He'd had to spend hours and hours getting lengthy upgrades that would last for a year or so before something better came along. As such, Maul's clone and fighting style had always given him the hardest battles as compared to the other Jedi he'd fought and hunted down.

"Qui-gon!" He yelled, racing forward and cursing his body once again. He may not hold the man on the pedestal he had as a young boy and teenager, but that didn't mean he wanted to see him die.

That and it would tear Obi-wan apart again. Not that Anakin cared.

"Get to the ship!" Qui-gon yelled, just barely meeting the Sith's blade in time. Anakin hesitated for only a moment before shooting a glare at the man and racing towards the ship. He would, after all, be of little help in this body. He hadn't fought with real arms and legs in how long? He wasn't used to it, and would only get in the way.

So he rushed onto the ship, yelling loudly for people to move. Padme and Panaka met him just inside.

"Anakin?" Padme asked, looking surprised. "What's wrong?"

"Qui-gon..." he gasped. "A guy came and attacked him with a lightsaber!"

Padme's face paled and she turned to follow Panaka to the cockpit with Anakin racing along just in front of them.

"Qui-gon's in trouble," Panaka said to Obi-wan.

Anakin stopped, staring openly.

There he was. His old master looking younger and...well, happier than Anakin had ever seen him. It sent a pang of sadness, followed by a black streak filled with an abundance of negative feelings through his heart, but he pushed it aside as Obi-wan turned to the front window, barely acknowledging Anakin's presence at all.

"Take off," he told the pilot and took one of the co-pilot seats, scanning the horizon. "Over there. Fly low."

Anakin could barely see over the dashboard, but the green and red lights striking at one another really was not an easily missed light-show, even in the bright, desert sunlight.

Maul was better than Qui-gon. That thought caused Anakin's heart to sink just a little. It was obvious to anyone trained worth their salt in swordsmanship. He was using form IV against Maul's form VI. This was a test. That form was by far the easiest form for Maul to employ. It gave away no secrets, but forced the Jedi to bring his own strengths to light.

Anakin found himself begrudgingly impressed. He hadn't thought the Zabrak to be capable of many higher thoughts. The being he'd met had lived for the fight, reveling in the pure power of the Dark Side of the Force like an alcoholic in a cantina at happy hour.

No sooner had the ship lifted from the ground, than Obi-wan turned in the swivel-chair and sprang for the door. Anakin followed, hot on his heels.

Their feet thumped across the dark, hard floor of the room where Qui-gon collapsed as the outside door closed, his harsh breathing from the run from the city and fight under the sun just beginning to take its toll. Neither Anakin nor Obi-wan said anything as they reached the Jedi-master's side.

"Master!" Obi-wan said, eyes wide with worry. Anakin watched him with just a little wonder. The Obi-wan he knew would be far more guarded than that.

"I'm alright," Qui-gon assured them, sitting back on his hands, body beginning to shake slightly as the adrenaline wore off.

"What was it?" Obi-wan asked, never taking his stormy eyes off of his master.

Qui-gon shook his head. "I don't know, but it was well trained in the Jedi arts." He swallowed, still breathing heavily. "My guess is it was after the queen."

"What if he's not?" Anakin asked quietly.

Both men turned to stare at him. Qui-gon answered first. "Then we will meet that challenge when the time comes." He held out his hand, pointing at Anakin. "In the meanwhile, Anakin Skywalker, meet Obi-wan Kenobi."

The world froze. He'd known it was Obi-wan. The familiar Force presence confirmed that to him when they'd landed on the planet, and again just minutes before in the cockpit, but somehow hearing the introduction from Qui-gon made it...real.

He didn't know what to think and his own emotional battle began with a vengeance inside of him.

Here was the man who had trained him. His father-figure, brother and best friend all rolled into one; the man who he trusted more than anyone in the universe, and the man who he had hated the most for a betrayal that might not have ever really happened. At least none of his memories pointed to that.

He reached out his hand, shaking the other's firmly in greeting, but still found himself unable to say anything.

Looking into those blue-green eyes, he couldn't help but recall incident after incident involving this Jedi in a matter of moments. Once upon a time, Anakin would have given his life if it meant saving Obi-wan's, but he could also remember the thrill of finally cornering him on the Death Star; the last Jedi Master—his own master—dying by his hand.

This man had saved his life countless times, but had also taken an arm and both legs. This man had let Anakin live in physical agony and had taken his children, but he had also saved those children from a dark fate far worse than death.

And this was the man who had trained Luke.

"It is an honor to meet you," he said finally, his voice sincere.

Obi-wan's eyes widened in surprise, but it was Qui-gon who seemed really taken aback.

"You as well," Obi-wan stated, glancing over to his master uncertainly.

Just then, the door opened to reveal Padme. "We're about to make the jump to hyperspace."

Qui-gon nodded, pushing his feet under him and standing up, only slightly wobbly. "Well, shall we go watch?"

Anakin and Obi-wan nodded.

"Let's just hope that the hyperdrive works and that Watto didn't get the last laugh." From the cockpit, they watched as the stars swirled into the mottled, twisting tunnel of hyperspace, and everyone heaved a sigh of relief, even if most of them would never admit it.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to my wonderful Beta Reader Amidala Skywalker!

Masks and Shields

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin found his half-carved japor snippet that he hadn't yet finished in one of the pockets of his bag a few hours before the ship would mimic night cycle of Coruscant. He blinked at the little, off-white piece of material for several moments. He'd forgotten about that too. If it hadn't already been in his bag, he would have forgotten to bring it. It hadn't exactly been high priority when he'd packed.

Padmé had told him once that she'd always worn it and held it close to her heart, even before they'd met up again during her term as Senator.

He smiled sadly, but he reached over to the pack and rummaged around the bottom until he found the carving implement he'd used previously and began to scratch away at the smooth surface while he went over future events in his mind. He had plans to make.

xXx

His Angel walked in later that night, dressed in the handmaiden outfit that reminded him of a Tatooine sunset. The darkened light in the common room where Anakin and Jar-Jar were forced to rest did not hide her troubled expression. He didn't move as she strode over to the communication counter and watched the recorded transmission they'd received on the planet.

Death tolls are catastrophic? As he recalled, less than one percent of the population had been hurt, and only about thirty percent of that number needed to see medics due to the lack of supplies and food.

Anakin wished those kinds of numbers would stay catastrophic in this universe. In his war-hardened mind, those kinds of numbers would symbolize a *very* good day. Entire civilizations had died while he watched both as General Skywalker and as Darth Vader (many of the latter, regrettably, by his own hand). The Jedi would have been thrilled with a 1% casualty rate.

But Padmé was used to peace. To her, this would be catastrophic.

He didn't need the Force to read her sadness.

Once the message ended, she stared blankly at the space the hologram of the councilor had occupied, probably thinking and running scenarios through her mind. It was obvious to him how desperately wanted to contact him and give him at least some reassurance, but she saw how foolhardy that would be. It wasn't hard to tell how much it still tore her up inside.

It amazed Anakin as to just how deeply she cared for her people; this had been her first year of her first term as Queen, and was already prepared to place her life on the line for them. She just had such an open heart.

Part of him wished he had that kind of conviction that easily. He used to… well, maybe not to large groups of people, but to individuals he met. However, he knew that that conviction and openness had been part of the reason why Palpatine had been able to get to him so thoroughly. He knew he'd never be able to really open himself up to others like that again. Somehow, it just made her seem stronger to him.

After a couple of seconds, she turned to leave, and noticed him watching her.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

He'd long since gotten a blanket to cover himself, and had tried to curl up and sleep, but he'd forgotten how cold space could be. Especially for a body used to Tatooine.

"Yes. Yourself?" he responded in a tone stating that he knew her unhappiness.

She looked down and slowly walked toward him, not wanting to wake Jar-Jar as he would probably wake everyone else. (She didn't have to worry. From what Anakin could see, the Gungan could sleep through a simultaneous Kaminoan thunderstorm and Star Destroyer air raid.)

"The Queen is worried. Her people are suffering – dying. She has to convince the Senate to intervene or… I'm not sure what will happen."

He couldn't stand to see her so upset. "You and the Queen will go back and do everything you can to save them. That's what will happen."

It worked. She smiled. "You're probably right about that."

Alright, time to turn on the childishness. "I don't know about the

Senate or what goes on, but don't they usually take a long time to make decisions?" he asked as innocently as he could.

She sighed, sitting down next to him in that graceful way that always had him mesmerized. "Yes. They do."

"What would you need to do to make them decide faster?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Padmé sat back for a moment, considering. "But support isn't that extreme of a request for a loyal Republic system, so it shouldn't be that difficult to decide. The Queen would probably ask the Senate to allow a few war ships to go to Naboo. The show of force would probably make the Trade Federation back down."

He couldn't help a small smile himself as she demonstrated yet again her ever optimistic, hopeful nature. Then he looked up, trying to seem as innocent as he could. "Will they do that? It sounds like a war to me."

She sighed. "It could very well turn into a battle."

"The Senate won't like that, will they." He said it as more of a statement, frowning to make it seem like he was thinking things through.

"No," she said sadly. "No one likes war, and people are slow to condone it for good reason."

"Because people die?"

She nodded. "That's right."

"So the Queen is going to ask the Senate to send war ships to help Naboo, but because of that it might turn into a war."

"Yes," she nodded again, looking rather pleased with herself at being able to explain the situation to a child who knew nothing of the goings on of politics.

Anakin made a show of thinking. "What's a 'vote of non-confidence'?" he asked.

She seemed taken aback. "It… it means that someone will ask for a vote of a group of people who don't believe their president, ruler or chancellor is fit to hold office. Why?" she cocked her head. "Where did you hear that?"

He considered his next words carefully. He was taking a large risk here, but he had to stop Palpatine from gaining office. If he came out and said anything directly, he doubted anyone would listen to him, and it would only make convincing anyone in the future more difficult. So he had to be subtle.

Unfortunately, that had always been Obi-Wan and Palpatine's strengths, not his.

"I… I had a dream," he started, having gone over the general idea in his mind several times already. "There was a room so big, it could have fit all of Mos Espa inside!" He made a show with his hands, as he'd seen children do before he became Vader and had stopped coming across children that weren't cowering in fear from him. Like the youngli—

No. Don't think about that. Think about what you're saying and doing!

He hoped it looked convincing.

"And it went so high," he continued, "that I almost couldn't see the ceiling! It looked like the sky because it was so far away!"

She blinked at him, undoubtedly having seen the Senate chamber at least in holorecordings for her studies in politics.

"And you were there… but you were dressed up like the queen. You looked really pretty," he looked down, fighting a blush. "And you said that you wanted to ask for a vote of non-confidence, and everyone agreed with you! But then, a shadow started to take over everything. Then I couldn't see the top of the ceiling anymore. And then all the planets started going dark too! Even Tatooine!"

He stopped there, wanting to see her reaction to his "dream" first. She stared at him, seemingly only able to blink and looking quite stunned. He loved it when she looked so open to him.

"You… dreamed all of this?" she asked.

He looked down, nodding.

"What do you think it means?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. But I don't think you should ask for a vote of non-confidence when that happens." He smiled up at her again. "You don't have to worry about it. It won't happen for a while because

you'll have to be Queen first!"

He may have been laying it on a bit thick, but he didn't have much to gauge that from. Truthfully, it was the best he could do at the moment. Fortunately, it seemed she bought his show as she just blinked at him for several seconds before sitting back and thinking.

After several long seconds of silence, he reached inside his tunic and brought out the japor snippet. Now was as good a time to give it to her as any, he supposed. And he did want her to have it.

"Here," he said, placing it in her hands. "It's a japor snippet. That's wood that only grows on Tatooine. It's very rare, but I got this and wanted to carve you something… so you'll remember me. It will bring you good fortune." He hoped it would, in any case. That was the superstition. Slaves loved to get ahold of japor, seeing it as a sign of change – most often for good – in the near future.

She took the obviously hand-woven necklace and the little piece of ivory wood and studied it.

"It's beautiful," she said, accepting the gift before looking up. "But I don't need this to remember you by."

"I know," he said, looking to the side. "But I may not see you again. I don't want you to get hurt."

She paused. Apparently she hadn't expected that answer. "Why would I get hurt, Ani?"

He shrugged and turned away.

"Ani," she said, a little more firmly. "Why would I get hurt?"

"You should sleep," he said, hoping she'd take the hint.

She did. Standing up, she eyed him, looking troubled. "Goodnight, Ani," she said softly as the door swished open to allow her passage.

He couldn't bring himself to answer.

xXx

Anakin liked the pilot. He didn't remember his name, and the man hadn't introduced himself this time around, but he took the time to explain everything to a child. And intelligent child, but still a child nonetheless. Not that Anakin didn't know everything the guy had to

say already, but he appreciated the thought. Especially since it gave him the excuse of not having to speak himself.

He felt far too nervous for that.

Palpatine was here. Anakin could sense him (if only vaguely – he wouldn't have been able to if he didn't know what to look for), and had to clamp down on his natural instinct to raise his shields higher. However, Qui-Gon's advice had been sound, and he knew if he had strong shields from the beginning, Palpatine would suspect something. Anakin had to at least try to avoid suspicion.

He wasn't sure he could. Hence the nervousness.

"Coruscant," the pilot said to Anakin as his hands moved over the streamlined controls. Anakin ached to sit in the piloting chair himself. *That* would take his mind off of the situation. He struggled to remain still, somehow managing to curb all of the excess energy this young body seemed to have. Barely.

The pilot continued. "The entire planet is one big city." He paused, scanning the horizon as their ship lowered into the atmosphere. Then he pointed towards a landing platform. "Look, there's Chancellor Valorum's shuttle. And Senator Palpatine is waiting for us."

Anakin's stomach dropped down to his feet, and stayed there. Nausea took a firm hold on whatever remained after the organ took leave, and Anakin felt immensely thankful that neither Obi-Wan nor Qui-Gon were there to see him blanch so obviously.

What he wouldn't give to have a mask again.

Not necessarily *that* mask, but a mask. The idea of being able to hide behind something like that felt safe and familiar. Well, safer in any case.

Coward, he berated himself. He couldn't hide anyway, not really. No one could hide from Palpatine.

That thought didn't help.

The ship landed smoothly, and Anakin followed the crew to the back to where he knew Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan and Jar-Jar would be. In the room behind the main exterior door, the Queen (or, one of her handmaidens who filled in for her, as it wasn't Padmé) and her handmaidens stood, waiting to disembark.

The two Jedi noticed him enter immediately. Qui-Gon studied him for several seconds, but his gaze never gave anything away. No doubt he'd noticed that Anakin had changed his shielding and wondered on the difference.

Anakin didn't dare ask if his presence in the Force seemed more natural or not, although he desperately wanted to. Actually, to his annoyance, his first instinct was to ask Obi-Wan. So he kept his mouth shut.

The ramp lowered, and the lead in his stomach suddenly turned to ice. Very, very dense ice. And every single step he took towards the two figures standing at the end of the platform surrounded by guards only made it worse. He clutched his hands behind his back and refused to meet the eyes of either man, but he also refused to look down in submission, choosing instead to focus on the sky-scraper in the distance behind them.

After what seemed like the longest walk of his life, they bowed to the Chancellor. Anakin followed suit, although it galled him because it felt like they were bowing to both of them and he never wanted to bow to Palpatine again.

They moved to the side and allowed the Queen to walk up to the two older men.

"It is a great gift to see you alive, Your Majesty," Palpatine said. It took every single ounce of will power Anakin had inside of him to not flinch. Qui-Gon put his hands on Anakin's shoulders and moved him to the front so he could see. It was a nice thought, but definitely the last place the former Sith wanted to be. Behind his back, he clenched each hand around the opposite wrists so tightly he'd begun to lose feeling, but he couldn't let go. Meanwhile, Palpatine continued. "With the communications breakdown we've been very concerned. I'm anxious to hear your report on the situation. May I present Supreme Chancellor Valorum."

"Welcome, Your Highness," the distinguished man said with a slight bow of his own. Anakin didn't remember much of Valorum. Studying him gave him something go focus on, so he did so. He found himself liking the Chancellor. He seemed far more open, respectful and humble than Palpatine had been.

As they continued talking, Anakin couldn't help but be reminded of his original feelings for Palpatine, and begrudgingly admitted to

himself that he should probably watch out for Valorum as well. He'd only ever met one honest politician.

"It is an honor to finally meet you in person," the Supreme Chancellor continued and turned to walk with them towards the transport. "I must relay to you how distressed everyone is over the current situation. I've called for a special session of the Senate to hear your position."

"I am grateful for your concern, Chancellor," she said with a nod of her head as she continued to walk with Palpatine as he escorted them to the air taxi.

"There is a slight question of procedure," Palpatine said with a sympathetic voice, "but I'm certain we can overcome it." And there he sounded confident. It was only because Anakin had spent years around this man in his previous life that he could catch the subtle nuances of arrogance with just a dash of smug.

'Overcome it' indeed. Anakin found himself glowering at the older man. At least he wasn't talking to Padmé at the moment. If he had been, Anakin wasn't sure he'd be able to handle it.

Palpatine's eyes flickered for a moment, sending a subtle glance in Anakin's direction, and that stopped him cold. He forced himself to calm down. *There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no passion, there is serenity.* Repeating those two lines over and over again in his head, he followed the small entourage, only stopping as he was about to sit down, realizing the Jedi weren't with him.

Noticing his questioning look, Qui-Gon motioned for him to go with the entourage. Anakin vaguely remembered going to the Naboo Senator's office when they'd arrived the first time, so he nodded and took a seat next to Jar-Jar.

"Da Queen's a bein' grossly nice, mesa thinks," he said to Anakin, who nodded tersely as the vehicle began to move. "Pitty hot."

He tried not to clutch his pants or his hands too tightly during the ride. He didn't succeed, and by the time they arrived, he'd gouged neat half-moon-shaped cuts into his palms to match the set he'd given himself on his wrist when they'd walked down the ramp of the ship earlier.

This was a bad idea, Skywalker, he thought to himself, shuffling dejectedly out of the pod. He couldn't fool Palpatine, and he knew it.

Why did he even bother to try?

Padmé caught his eye as they walked into the turbo-lift, and sent him an encouraging smile.

Right. That's why.

xXx

Darth Sidious hated incompetence.

Incompetence should be rooted out and destroyed mercilessly in all aspects of life. Such uselessness could never tolerated in the Sith Order. Unfortunately, useless is exactly what his apprentice had proved himself to be by allowing the Queen to arrive. It is, after all, rather difficult to make a martyr out of a living person.

The entire galaxy would look to him and his planet when they heard of her death, and they would all be lifted onto a pedestal. Being voted into the position of Supreme Chancellor would practically be guaranteed.

Now he had to completely rework his plans all due to the incompetence of his fool apprentice. His apprentice who lacked not only tact, but also restraint. And he fancied himself equal to his master, did he? The very notion was laughable.

No, Sidious realized he would have to find a new apprentice very soon. Pity that he could not afford to raise another one himself. He simply didn't have the patience or time, and he would definitely choose more wisely. He would have any number of younglings to choose from.

The boy in front of him for example.

He turned his attention from the Queen and her 'update' for the barest moment to glance at the front of the air taxi, eyeing the blond haired child who had been glaring at him so harshly. Oh, it hadn't been terribly obvious, and it could easily be the glare of a boy who didn't trust authority figures, but somehow, Palpatine felt it was more than that.

Oh yes, that boy was an enigma. A delightful one at that. Just who was he? Why had the Jedi brought him back? Surely they could not hope that the Council would allow him to train at his age? Especially with his obviously negative disposition. Even Qui-Gon Jinn couldn't be

that idealistic.

The boy had a Force presence, that was for sure. He felt something slightly hidden as well, as if he were shielding something. They would undoubtedly be crude, rudimentary shields at best, and it took more restraint than he cared to admit to not probe. Even that use of the Force might give him away, and he could not afford that.

He caught a lull in the conversation and turned his attention back to the supposed Queen. He smiled and began to speak of his great relief that they had been able to escape such dire circumstances. Then he turned his thoughts back to the situation at hand. It would soon be time to put his newly formed plans into action.

xXx

Padmé sat in the Queen's finery, face newly painted and fresh clothes donned. It had been easy enough to secure an hour or so in which she and her handmaidens could 'freshen up' (that is, switch places again) so she could present a fresh face to the politicians she would meet that day.

Now she forced herself to listen to Naboo's Senator as he filled her in on the most recent developments in the Senate. She had to know this to play to their fullest sympathies and hopefully gain the support she needed.

Captain Panaka entered through the doors off to the side, causing only the barest distraction. She sighed inwardly, unwilling to let her mind stray from the task at hand. Her people depended on this.

The last line and conclusion of Senator Palpatine's tirade easily drew her full attention.

"If I may say so, Your Majesty, there is little hope the Senate will act on the invasion."

She appreciated his straight-forward answer. That didn't mean she liked what she heard. "Chancellor Valorum seemed to think there is hope."

He sighed, as if placating a child. She tried not to let it ruffle her. In the current affairs of the Senate, she was an inexperienced child. "If I may say so, Your Majesty, the Chancellor has little real power. He is mired down by baseless accusations of corruption. A manufactured scandal surrounds him. The bureaucrats are in charge now."

She would not allow her formality to drop! And she would not give away the fact that the only thing she wanted to do was massage the headache beginning to form behind her eyes away. "What options have we?"

He began to pace again. "Our best choice would be to push for the election of a stronger Supreme Chancellor. One who will take control of the bureaucrats, enforce the laws, and give us justice. You could call for a vote of no confidence in Chancellor Valorum."

The words froze her cold. For several seconds, she could not help but stare in surprise, wonder and just a little bit of fear at his words. A vote of no confidence. Just like Anakin had said. But how… how could he have known?

"Your majsety?" Senator Palpatine walked towards her, worry twisting his otherwise soft, if older features.

"Forgive me. Your words startled me. He has been our strongest supporter."

He nodded, but didn't look convinced. "Our only other choice would to be to submit a plea to the
courts."

She shook her head. "The courts take even longer to decide things than the Senate. Our people are *dying* senator. We must do something *quickly* to stop the Federation."

He tipped his head in a slight nod of agreement. "To be realistic, Your Highness, I'd say we're going to have to accept Federation control for the time being."

"That," she answered immediately, "is something I cannot do." They sat in silence for several more seconds before she rose to her feet. "Senator," she said with a nod of her head. "I would ask for some time to rest and consider our options."

"Of course," he replied, walking over to his desk and comming his secretary. "Please send someone in to escort the Queen to her quarters."

"Thank you for your appraisal of the situation," she said as the doors opened behind them, allowing several servants inside.

"Of course, Your Majesty," he said with a warm smile.

She'd asked Rabé to motion for Anakin and Jar-Jar to follow once they left, so she didn't need to worry about them. Thank goodness. All she needed was something else on her plate. Such was the life of a politician.

She ran over the situation again in her mind. It didn't add up. Why would the Supreme Chancellor ask for an emergency meeting if there would be nothing to gain from it? Perhaps just to make a show? If he really held so little power, this could be a bid to regain that power, or it could be a front to show that he still did have the power required to hold his position, no matter the actual truth.

Perhaps that was the case and he was simply an excellent actor. But the Jedi Master, Qui-Gon, had spoken highly of the Supreme Chancellor. She doubted anyone could fool a Jedi to that extent. So she should trust him? After the pure miracles the Jedi had conjured on Tatooine, she was just about ready to do so on their word alone. She still didn't like the path he'd taken, but he'd also done everything he could to get her here, and that counted for quite a bit in her reckoning.

Why was she even looking so deeply into this? If it weren't for Anakin's little warning, she wouldn't have. So all of this uncertainty came from a mere dream? From a child who had never even seen the Senate chamber before?

It all depended on the Chancellor. She would have to arrange a meeting and discuss everything with him before hand. It might weaken her stance later if uncovered and brought to light (she could see the headlines of scandal and secret pacts now), but she was willing to take that chance.

"Eirtaé," she said.

"My Lady?" the handmaiden at her side spoke, managing to curtsy and not lose step.

"Contact the Supreme Chancellor. Tell him I need to meet with him before the emergency meeting. Do not take 'no' for an answer."

She shot a worried look at her queen, but curtsied again. "Yes, My Lady."

xXx

The Chancellor could only receive her just before the meeting the next

day. They'd stayed the night in an apartment arranged for them by Senator Palpatine. Then they'd seen Anakin off to the Jedi that morning. Padmé hoped that wasn't the last time she'd see him. She couldn't help but admire the strength of someone so young, who had the will to leave their previous life behind to pursue something better. There was also something about him… a profound sadness that didn't seem to fit someone his age. It intrigued her.

But that was something she would have to think on later. Right now, she stood before the door to the Chancellor's receiving chamber, motioning for her handmaidens to stay near the door. Then she walked inside with her head held high, despite the weight of the headdress she now wore. The Chancellor rose to greet her, bowing his head in respect. She returned the gesture.

"My Lady," he said, gesturing to the couch. "Please, have a seat."

"Thank you, Chancellor," she said.

"I was told that you needed to speak to me urgently."

"Yes, Chancellor." She took a deep, but still imperceptible breath, and began to voice her concerns. "Please forgive me for my bluntness, Chancellor, but it seems I have little time. I have been informed that despite the emergency meeting, there is little hope that the Senate will act, and I will be forced to submit a plea to the courts. Is this true?"

He blinked at her for a few moments before standing up and beginning his own form of slow, deliberate pacing.

"It is a likely outcome," he conceded.

She closed her eyes for a moment. "Chancellor, you have done much for my people, and I am grateful. However, if I must go to extreme measures to save my people, I will."

The Chancellor stopped abruptly. "Extreme measures?"

"It has been… proposed that I move for a vote of no confidence, because you supposedly have no real power."

His shocked expression did little to help her conscience at the moment, but she refused to back down.

"A vote of… but… " he said, sinking back into his chair slowly.

"That is why I asked to come and see you," she said slowly. "I have more than a little reason to think that this would prove disastrous for the rest of the galaxy in the long run, but I cannot allow for the suffering of my people."

He shook his head. "Even if you did move for a vote of no confidence and someone else was voted in, it would take weeks to gather the support necessary to force a move on the subject. Either way, it seems your situation will not be resolved."

She felt frustration bubble inside her, but kept it firmly in check. "Then what would you suggest?"

He shook his head. "When you appear on the floor, the Federation will undoubtedly protest. Unless you have proof that atrocities are being done, or proof that the occupation is indeed illegal, than there is little anyone can do."

"The communications block is not proof enough?"

He shook his head. "No."

She tried not to feel her heart sink, tried not to hear the children crying out in hunger and pain. She had a vivid imagination and could easily conjure up the atrocities being done to her people… her family.

"What proof would be necessary?"

"Well, recordings from a non-biased third party-"

"A Jedi?"

He paused, contemplating her interruption. "Yes… yes, that might work."

"What would the recordings need to be of?"

"Well, of what is being done to the people. Interviews, recordings of public displays of abuse, anything along those lines. If we could also find out their real reason behind this… "

"Real reason?" she asked, blinking.

"If they are doing as you claim," he said, rising from his seat and pacing again, "then there has to be a reason behind the blockade other than a protest of taxes. Why else would they do so?"

She blinked, looking away as her mind worked through that. Of course! That's what she'd missed before! What was their real motivation?

"It seems the idea of sending in a Jedi is becoming more and more of an answer," she commented. "But there is still the problem of time. At the absolute least, this task would require a standard week so finish. I cannot subject my people to that kind of torture for an entire week."

He shook his head, running a hand through his hair. "The only way would be to have them do what they are trying to make you do: Somehow force them to sign a treaty on your terms."

"To do that I would need to return to the planet, with an army. Or at least an infiltration team." Catch 22.

"Forgive me, Your Majesty, but I cannot see any other way."

She paused, watching him for several moments, her mouth thinning into a line. "Very well," she said. "I will return with my protectors, and see what I can do on the planet."

"Your Majesty, that is suicide!" The Chancellor protested.

"My place is with my people, Chancellor," she replied, standing up.

"Senator Palpatine will not approve," he said. It was a last-ditch attempt at best, and they both knew it.

"I do not answer to the Senator," she replied simply. "Thank you for your time, Chancellor."

"Just to make it clear, you will have to defer, but make sure you defer on your terms," he called after her as she walked out.

"Of course, Chancellor," she said with one final nod of her head, and walked out the door.

xXx

The Jedi Temple looked just as Anakin remembered it. The rooms, the halls, the décor, the people. It brought back far too many uncomfortable memories for him. At least he'd had time to prepare himself. It had taken the Council hours to decide to interview him. Not that Anakin found himself surprised. The Jedi Council seemed to take almost as long to actually act on anything as the Senate did.

When he finally received summons to go to the temple, his stomach had decided to start a Form IV spar session against his ribs and intestines and it had taken all of his will to keep an emotionless face. He'd immediately followed Qui-Gon (who had delivered the summons) out and onto an air shuttle that had taken them towards the massive structure that had been his home for fourteen years of his life – the structure he'd destroyed in one fell swoop.

As they approached the steps he'd led several thousand clones up, he couldn't help but ask himself the same questions over and over – not that he had any forthcoming answers. What would happen this time? Should he let this play out as it had last time? Should he at least try to inform them of Palpatine and his role? He'd have to reveal his past though, and he doubted many of the Jedi Council would trust him after he revealed his own part in the matters (and that's if they believed anything about his time-traveling at all). So what would be the best option going forward?

He honestly didn't know.

He'd forgone seeing Padmé one final time. It hurt, knowing he had to cut off interaction with her for her own good, but he would not take the chance of her getting hurt again if he fell. He already had difficulties trying to hold onto the light.

Once you begin down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny.

He repressed a sigh as he paced the length of the waiting room outside of the council chambers, hands firmly behind his back again. Qui-Gon watched him intently. Had his gaze been that intense last time? It wasn't helping.

Ah, if Sidious could see him now. Dark Lord of the Sith, afraid of a little meeting.

Could he ever succeed at anything?

"The Council will see you now," a Jedi he did not recognize informed them with a bow. She had dark skin with intricate patterns tattooed on her neck and ears. He couldn't see her eyes, and she had no hair, although she did have what looked almost like horns curling up and around the back of her head, stopping about an centimeter away from each other. He was intrigued that he couldn't recognize her race.

Then he berated himself for trying to find another distraction.

"Anakin," Qui-Gon said, coming up to him, "just remember to stay calm. They're not going to hurt you. Make sure you answer truthfully and as honestly as you can. They will be able to know otherwise."

"Yes, sir," he said, trying not to make the comment sound sarcastic.

"Go on in," Qui-Gon smiled, pushing him towards the doors. As he approached, he felt a tug through the Force open them. Intimidation much? It might have been normal for a Jedi, but for someone not schooled in the ways of the Force… it did not help the Council seem benevolent or harmless as Qui-Gon had insinuated. The question was, did they do that on purpose? He wasn't sure which answer would be worse.

Checking once again to see his shields firmly in place, he squared his shoulders back, and walked in; a former Sith Lord confronting the Jedi Council, half of which he'd personally slaughtered.

This would not be pleasant.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I can't see how anyone who has any grasp on reading force presences couldn't tell that Padmé really is the Queen, and I'm betting that Palpatine figured it out rather quickly. *shrug* It's my own personal interpretation of things.

Beta readers: Amidala Skywalker and Khalthar

Confontations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin bowed before the Jedi Council, and waited to be allowed to speak, all the while ignoring the butterflies in his stomach. They went around the room, introducing themselves before explaining some of the tasks they would be asking of him. As before, he flew through the guessing portion of the test, surprising many of them (ha, they thought he would be unable to hear their thoughts with only minimal shielding?), and then they started asking questions.

"How feel you?" Master Yoda asked.

Such a simple question, but how was he supposed to answer? He remembered this part from Before. It wasn't a happy memory. Maybe he should just bite the blaster bolt and tell them he's frustrated, or scared… Yeah, that would go over well. Conflicted? Determined? Like he desperately wanted to (needed to) do what was right in the memory of his not-yet-born son? Any one of those answers could work.

"I feel… many things, right now, Master," he replied. Best to start off on the best foot, which would mean Qui-Gon was right; he had to tell the truth.

"Hmm, Master you say?" Yoda chuckled.

Anakin almost winced at his slip up. He was used to calling Yoda 'master'. Even as a Sith he'd done so. Of course, he'd called him other things like 'the little troll' as Obi-Wan had at times, as well as a few other not so nice Huttese words, 'Jedi scum', etc.

"Should I call you something else?" he asked, forcing his voice to remain calm and emotionless.

"Afraid, are you?" He never changed, did he? Always ignoring questions anyone else posed. Anakin had to fight his first reaction of changing his expression. He was positive sending the Grandmaster of the Jedi Order a death glare wouldn't be conducive to his goals at the moment.

He mentally took a moment to calm himself and then remembered

Qui-Gon's words again. He had a definite answer to Yoda's new question: *absolutely. He'd been afraid for most of his life, even if he'd only come to realize that as a Sith.* "Yes, sir."

"But not of us," Yoda remarked, looking intrigued and puzzled.

"You have been trained before?" Ki-Adi-Mundi spoke for the first time. "We are having difficulty sensing your thoughts."

Moment of truth. "Yes, sir," he replied.

"By whom?" This one from Mace Windu, looking as suspicious as ever. Anakin firmly clamped down on his thoughts of the man, lest they all feel his anger. He pushed his last memory of the man from his mind forcibly and thought about how to answer them.

"I… did not know who he was," he said slowly. "He would not tell me his true identity." He knew they'd be back to dwell on that one and had no idea how he'd answer them.

"You must lower your mental shields if we are to ascertain if you belong in the Jedi Order," a voice behind him from yet another master who had died long before he'd turned.

Anakin didn't shy away from them, but – like his reactions in the rest of this meeting – it was a near thing. Lower his shields? Really? They actually expected him to do so? He couldn't even fathom following their request because he didn't trust them. After all this time, he still found he couldn't put any faith in this council that had failed him too many times. There were barely a couple of people on the entire council who he did not feel completely rejected by.

Palpatine had done his work well, curse him!

"I can't, sir," he said, hopefully with more bravado than he felt.

"Now you fear us," Yoda commented. "Fear is the path to the dark side."

"Yes, Master Yoda," Anakin said, shaking his head. "Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, and hate leads to suffering."

"You learned this from your former teacher?" Adi Gallia asked. He remembered her. She'd always gone out of her way to make him feel welcome before she'd died.

Anakin looked back at her, then turned back to face Yoda and Windu. "Yes."

"So some Jedi training he has."

"So it would seem," Windu said, eyeing Anakin suspiciously.

"May I speak, Masters?" he asked, looking past them so as not to meet their eyes.

A ruffle at his boldness went around the room. "You may," Yoda acquiesced.

"I don't claim to know why Jedi choose to stay Jedi, but I would choose to become a Jedi," *again,* "because I… " he paused, knowing what he wanted to say next, but not wanting to admit it. Doing so went against every instinct his body possessed. But it was also a conclusion he'd come to, and no matter how much he hated to admit it, he had to say it. "Because I can't do this on my own." Force that hurt to admit! The Chosen One couldn't do this on his own. Some Chosen One. It didn't help that part of him braced for a barrage of Force-lightning because he'd showed weakness. It didn't come, but somehow, that just made it worse. He forcefully shoved those thoughts in the same corner of his mind that he'd shoved the rest of his unwanted thoughts and went on. "I want to stay good. I want to *be* good. I believe the only place I can do that is here."

They watched him, impressed. He could feel that his words had reached them (although he didn't know how much good that would do). It felt good to know that he'd gotten them to listen, at least. How long had it been since he'd tried to convince someone onto his side without using excessive force? Well, Luke, but that didn't count as he hadn't succeeded.

"I sense much from you," Yoda commented.

"Yes, sir," he replied, "but that is why I want to stay, so I can learn to overcome that."

"Speak beyond your years, you do."

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak more.

"We will deliberate on this, and inform you of our answer," Windu said with more than a touch of finality.

"Yes, Master Windu," Anakin said, bowed and walked out.

xXx

The doors closed and the council stared in blank quiet at them for far too long.

"Unforeseen, this is," Yoda finally broke the silence.

"We cannot allow him to train," Oppo Rancisis spoke up firmly. "He has had previous, unknown training. He could pervert the ways of the Jedi."

And that quickly, everyone began to voice their thoughts, following Master Rancisis' example.

"He is an earnest child, seeking after light," Adi Gallia protested softly. "And how else will he ever learn to control his power?"

Ki-Adi-Mundi glanced at her before shaking his head thoughtfully. "And he is powerful."

"We do not want to take him on simply because of that power," Plo Koon pointed out.

"What would you suggest we do with him now if we do not train him?" Adi Gallia asked, genuinely curious. "If we send him anywhere, half-trained and uneducated, he will be temped by the dark side and open to any fallen Jedi for training."

"He is too much of a wild card and far too old to be allowed," Mace said, rubbing his fingers against his chin, eyes still on the door.

"Mace is right," Oppo nodded. "If we allow him in, then why have we turned away so many others? He only has three years before he can no longer be taken as a padawan. That is not enough time and would only give him false hope."

"But what if he is the child of the prophesy?" Ki-Adi-Mundi spoke again.

No one seemed to want to answer that question.

Mace turned and glanced down at Yoda. "What do you think, Grandmaster?"

Yoda didn't speak for several moments, instead just sitting with his

gimmer stick propped up under his chin. Finally, he opened his mouth. "A powerful ally he could be. Also a powerful enemy."

The council took his words into consideration.

"Meditate on this, we should. No decision will I make tonight," he proclaimed. Several surprised expressions came over the different council members' faces.

"We have only just begun discussing the matter," Mace pointed out, brow furrowing as he looked at the smaller Jedi Master.

"Wish to meditate, I do." Plo Kloon exchanged a glance with Ki-Adi-Mundi, as did Mace. Rarely was Yoda so vocally adamant.

"Very well," Adi Gallia said slowly. "I move to adjourn."

A soft chorus of "aye"s ran through the council, and the meeting room cleared. Strangely enough, Yoda meandered out after everyone else instead of staying behind and watching the other Council members leave as he usually did. He shuffled slowly, taking his time as always, but Mace Windu still found the change slightly unsettling. Sitting back in his chair, he put a hand to his mouth and rubbed his chin again as he watched the older Council member step onto the lift and disappear from sight, slightly concerned at these new turns of events… . and wondering what in the Galaxy those shatterpoints he'd seen around the boy had been.

xXx

Senator Sheev Palpatine was *not* happy.

That, as a general statement, wouldn't be out of the ordinary, as he tended to not be a very happy person, despite appearances. But today took it to an extreme. Not only did his plans not come to fruition due to his extremely incompetent apprentice, but his contingency plan had fallen through as well! He wasn't out of options yet, but he had never found himself so close to losing control.

"I am disappointed, Your Majesty," he said as calmly as he could to the dressed-up little brat in front of him as she walked away. "I did not expect you to defer." He had pegged the girl as a rash pacifist, someone who wouldn't do anything until provoked and even then. But once something happened that worried her, she would rush into the situation, doing everything in her power to get her way. The pattern suggested intelligence and a sharp mind, but not experience.

So why had she acted as she had?! Or not acted, in this particular case.

"I cannot say I am pleased with the results," she replied, fixing her eyes straight ahead. "However, now they will gain the proof necessary to stop the Trade Federation from doing this to any other system."

"And what of *our* system?" he asked.

She shook her head (no small feat with that headdress), "Please forgive me, Senator, but a change of power would not do our system any good now. Weak or not, the current state of affairs has brought a stability that will benefit our system most. It saddens me," she looked down, somehow managing to look contrite and proud at the same time. "It is clear to me now that the Republic no longer functions. I have come to the conclusion that we must remedy this on our own."

"On our own? But how, Your Majesty? Did you not say yourself that our people are dying? That we must settle this dispute as quickly as possible? How can we do this without an army?"

She paused, and he caught a wave of uncertainty from her. "I do not know, Senator," she said. "That is what I intend to figure out."

How was it that this little *wench* could bring him so close to losing his control?! She wasn't even Force sensitive! And here she'd gone against his decision all on a whim?! Really?! If Maul did not succeed in killing her this time, he would regret having been born before Palpatine finally let him die.

"I must admit, I am at a loss myself, Your Majesty. Why did you defer then?"

"To prevent this travesty from occurring again."

He paused, an idea beginning to form in his mind. He already had a few elements in play… "It sounds as if you have given up on Naboo," he said cautiously.

She turned on him faster than he thought possible in her expansive get up. "I will *never* give up, Senator. I will find a way to free our people!"

He stopped, putting on an expression of contrition. "Of course, Your Majesty," he said, ducking his head. "I will look into this situation as well and do my best to support you, of course. Rest assured that my aides and I will assist you in any way we can.

She nodded slightly before turning back to the lift that would take her to her quarters. "Thank you, Senator."

"I fear all of the help we can receive may not be enough," he commented.

"Then we will try until it is enough," she stated firmly as she and her handmaidens, who had stood guard outside the Naboo hoverform, walked onto the lift.

He bowed as the door closed. "Naturally, Your Highness."

Then he turned and stalked calmly down the hall, looking every centimeter the Senator that he was.

xXx

"And this," Qui-Gon said, opening a large door, "is The Room of A Thousand Fountains." He gestured around the large room inside the Jedi Temple. Anakin tried not to wince. The last time he'd seen this room, it had been in flames.

He needed a reaction to cover his… lack of reaction. What had he said about this room the first time? Probably something alluding to its size. "It's so big," he commented, trying to look wide-eyed and interested.

"Indeed it is," Qui-Gon commented with an appreciative, fond nod. Obi-Wan just looked at Anakin with a mostly blank expression. Anakin had been around his former master often enough to recognize suspicion when he saw it. So he didn't trust Anakin. Had it been like that the first time and the nine-year-old him had simply not picked up on it?

The side of him used to leaning on the darkness insisted that Obi-Wan must have always been like that. Why else would he hold Anakin back? Other than jealousy of course. The other half of him, the side that wished to have his best friend back, wanted desperately to give his former mentor the benefit of the doubt. Obi-Wan was a master of negotiation and could see through people (especially Anakin) so easily. Of course he could see that this was all an act. No wonder he was suspicious. That didn't mean he had been the first time. And even if he had been, wasn't that prudent of him? After all, Obi-Wan and 'prudence' were practically synonymous.

The two different views continued to war within him, and he found it difficult to ignore. So he turned his attention away from the younger

Jedi and fixed his eyes back on Qui-Gon, who had gone into an explanation.

"… All five separate levels were combined to make this room what it is today. Some of the fountains on the balconies and what is left of the higher levels that give the runoff necessary for many of the fountains on the lower levels as well." He paused and looked back at his young companions, eyes fixing on the time-traveler.

"Would you like to see one? Or should we go to the dining hall for dinner?"

Anakin blinked when he realized that Qui-Gon had addressed him. He glanced up at Obi-Wan, and saw the barest scowl there. That was definitely an annoyed expression. Why? More importantly, why wasn't he speaking his mind? Anakin certainly would have.

Then it hit him; padawans weren't supposed go against their master. At least not normal padawans. No wonder he insisted Anakin follow his lead (with little success). Anakin felt himself scowl as well. As ever, the perfect Jedi. The Master has the lead in everything, and it isn't a padawan's place to question.

"What do you think, Obi-Wan?" he asked, working hard to keep sarcasm and scorn out of his voice. Mentally he sighed, berating himself. Apparently, he still hadn't forgiven Obi-Wan for everything. He didn't know if he ever could.

Obi-Wan looked down at him, now surprised. He'd gotten a much better Sabacc face as he'd grown older, apparently. He blinked at Anakin, then looked uncertainly up at his master, and then back at Anakin.

"I believe I-"

"Showing him the Temple, are you?" A high-pitched, raspy voice interrupted him, and almost gratefully he turned to look at Yoda. Anakin filed Obi-Wan's reaction away for later and focused on the newcomer as well.

"Just the main areas, Master," Qui-Gon said with a bow. Obi-Wan followed suit, and belatedly, Anakin did as well. Right, he had to show respect if he wanted in.

Why did he want this again?

"Mmm," Yoda nodded, eyes sweeping over the Jedi and fixing on Anakin. He clamped down on the impulse to shift uncomfortably. Yoda's gaze definitely unnerved him, but he wouldn't give the other the pleasure of knowing that.

"That way," he said, trying to sound as childish as he could, "even if I'm not accepted, I can still say I've been inside the Jedi Temple!"

Yoda chuckled. "Oh, tell others, you would, of our home?"

Anakin's expression darkened and he spoke defensively. "Of course not, Master."

"Master Yoda," Qui-Gon started, obviously not pleased with the comment himself, but Yoda cut him off.

"Why would you not? If in your shoes, I were, tell everyone, I would."

Anakin and Qui-Gon both blinked, taken aback by the Master's words as he limped forward, laughing to himself again. He walked directly up to Anakin and looked up at the boy. Anakin resisted taking a step back. In his previous life, he never would have admitted that Yoda had intimidated him. Seeing him almost eye-to-eye made the feeling far worse.

"Hmm," Yoda said, studying him intently.

"What?" Anakin asked, glancing over to Qui-Gon, hoping for a rescue. Seeing his apparent distress, the older man moved to intervene. Before he'd even taken a step, Yoda spoke again.

"Continue with the tour, you should," he said, then turned to hobble off. The three of them watched him go for several silent seconds with varying degrees of surprise, confusion and annoyance.

"That was… strange," Obi-Wan muttered.

Anakin couldn't help but agree.

Finally, Qui-Gon turned and began to walk towards the other side of the room. "We'll show you that fountain, Anakin. Then we'll get some dinner. How does that sound?"

Forcing a smile, Anakin nodded. "That would be acceptable." Qui-Gon raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything. Neither one noticed Obi-Wan's confused expression as he brought up the rear.

xXx

Obi-Wan Kenobi did not know what to make of Anakin Skywalker. The boy was a conundrum in its most obvious state.

First, his training. Obi-Wan had a hard time even telling that he'd had training at all, but Qui-Gon insisted that he had. Everyone else seemed to focus on the fact that he'd been trained and who had trained him. Obi-Wan agreed that those brought up some disturbing ideas. What if he'd been trained by an exiled Jedi? A dark Jedi? The Sith had just popped up again. What if it had been the Sith they'd confronted on the planet? Sending a child apprentice as a spy would be an excellent way to get information about the temple (which was why Obi-Wan had insisted they only show him common areas, and even felt rather uncomfortable with that). What if he'd been trained by someone else altogether? Some unknown faction. The implications of letting someone like that into the temple at all were… unthinkable!

But what really bothered Obi-Wan was the extent that he would have to be trained to hide his presence as well as he had. To Obi-Wan, he felt like just about any other presence in the Force. A little more controlled, but normal none the less.

Obi-Wan didn't know anyone without a rank of Senior Knight that had that kind of training, and this random nine-year-old could use such techniques? It didn't make any sense.

Then there were his reactions to people around him. He seemed to react either completely indifferently to or openly annoyed at Qui-Gon. Why would he act that way towards someone who had freed him? It made no sense.

The few Jedi they'd introduced him to in the halls gained various reactions. The boy had tried to hide a flinch as he'd been introduced to no less than three Jedi, and Obi-Wan felt a distinct emotional fluctuation during those meetings as well. Others he greeted as politely as if he had never met them before.

Then there had been his reaction to the Chancellor and Senator Palpatine. Obi-Wan had caught faint, but distinct impressions of fear and wariness. Interestingly enough, Qui-Gon hadn't seemed to notice.

Whenever the Queen's handmaiden (also known as the real Queen, who seemed to think she could even fool Jedi when she apparently couldn't even fool a young boy) appeared, Anakin's Force presence wavered drastically. Obi-Wan had been surprised that yet again, Qui-

Gon had declined feeling anything from the boy, and asked if Obi-Wan's feelings were clear. It was almost like Obi-Wan was… connected (dare he think *bonded*) to the boy in some way.

It unnerved him. Slightly.

And that brought him to the most confusing reactions from Anakin; those towards Obi-Wan himself. The former slave seemed to fluctuate between hiding an immense sense of comfortable respect and an intense, utter loathing. Obi-Wan didn't know what he could have possibly done to the boy to deserve either one. Perhaps he reminded Anakin of someone? That had been the only logical explanation he'd come up with. Nothing else fit, but then why were the reactions so forceful?

A tug in the Force drew his attention away from his inner thoughts to the other two beings in front of him. Yet another sense that came from the boy. It took him a few moments of concentrating to recognize the emotion. Depression. That was it; a sense of sad resignation. Obi-Wan's lips thinned into a hard line. Why was he getting these feelings from the boy? And what did they mean? Why would anyone be depressed when shown something like the Room of a Thousand Fountains?

"Anakin," Qui-Gon said suddenly, "why don't you go on ahead. It's just around the corner there." He nodded to the path ahead as it rounded a grassy hill.

The boy glanced between the two Jedi, silently studying him, then shrugged his shoulders. "Very well."

Once the boy had disappeared around the bend, Qui-Gon dropped back to walk by Obi-Wan. "You seem conflicted, Padawan," the Knight's voice said softly.

"That boy does not make sense," Obi-Wan commented with a shake of his head before he turned to face his Master. "I don't know what to think of him."

Qui-Gon smiled. "Neither do I, apprentice."

Obi-Wan fixed him with an incredulous look. "Then why are you doing this, Master? What if he's been sent as a spy? Or worse?"

The older man raised an eyebrow. "Worse?"

"It's unlikely, but he could be an assassin. We've seen children trained to do horrible things."

Qui-Gon nodded mutely. "You have a point, Obi-Wan. But I don't get that feeling from him."

"He has shielding, Master. He could be hiding it," Obi-Wan insisted.

The older Jedi shook his head. "But then why do we feel no malice or intent from him? At his age, I don't think he could master that."

But he's mastered mental shields, Obi-Wan thought. He knew better than to say it. Once his Master had his mind set on something, an army of Sith couldn't get him to change it.

"You are wise to worry, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon commented thoughtfully. "He very well could have been sent here under cover. But then again, what if he hasn't?"

"Should we take a chance? The safety of the temple for an uncertain future."

"That," Qui-Gon said, his voice gentle but firm, "is for the Council to decide. Until then, we can at least make him feel welcome."

Suppressing a sigh, Obi-Wan looked back at the small figure ahead of them uneasily. "Yes, Master."

Qui-Gon walked ahead, catching up with the child and striking up a conversation about mechanics. Shaking his head, Obi-Wan gave up trying to figure out the enigma that was Anakin Skywalker for now and followed.

xXx

Jedi Knight Traavis glanced over the ship's controls, double checking the coordinates he'd set in his nav-computer for Naboo as the stars slurred together into the glowing, blotched, tunnel-like appearance of hyperspace. The council had just given him the mission to bring back proof of an illegal occupation of the planet that morning. When he'd asked why the Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn and Padawan Kenobi hadn't brought back proof, he'd been told that they had focused on their mission of negotiating and peace keeping, which had in turn progressed to protecting the Queen. They had both offered testimony, but their word alone didn't seem to be enough.

Traavis shook his head. How sad that it had come to a time that the word of a Jedi—peace keepers of the galaxy—would not be trusted.

The Master/Padawan pair would continue to protect the Queen as they had been doing, and Traavis would collect the information necessary to put a movement through the Senate.

He knew why the council had chosen him. His personal motto revolved around making sure everything was done right the first time. That, and he tended to deal with large groups of distraught people well. This wouldn't be his first undercover mission, and he doubted it would be his last.

Traavis felt confident enough with the assignment as long as he didn't run into any Sith. He'd only heard the rumor of a possible return of the dark order just a few hours before. The very idea of meeting such a powerful darksider sent a shiver up his spine, but he siphoned the feeling off into the Force and sat back to go over the statistics of the planet, dismissing the possibility of fighting such an entity.

What were the odds that he'd encounter the Sith on this planet after all?

Chapter End Notes

> Author's Note: A "hovorform" are those floating disk/room things in the Senate. Made up the name. It's not canon...at least I'm not sure if it is.
>
> Please let me know what you think, and thank you to everyone who responded last time! It's part of what keeps me going ! :D

Dreams and Confrontations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin had his first prophetic dream that night. It had been years since he'd had those types of dreams, but it wasn't an experience one tended to forget.

He could always tell the difference between the prophetic visions and other dreams. They tended to be vague, but strangely precise at the same time, and he was always cognoscente of them. Without question, he always knew who he'd dreamed about. This time was no different.

In this dream, he stood at his full, adult height. His surroundings swirled slowly in calming, soothing waves that he couldn't describe as anything other than beautiful. It was a landscape. He couldn't really see it, but it felt familiar. At first he just reveled in the comfort of it. Then, without warning, dark streaks began to shoot harshly through the otherwise calm eddies. Every streak oozed pain, and he shied away from them.

Then he heard Padmé's voice. She said his name once, then gasped and he felt her die again; just like he had with his dream of her giving birth. Her sudden lack of presence brought back far too many painful memories.

He gasped, shock coming over him, even in his dream state. "No…" he whispered. Before he knew it, he was screaming out the loss and pain all over again, and the world turned into a whirlwind of black, red and yellow. He knew those colors, but didn't care enough to move away from them anymore. His mind remained in blatant denial. She couldn't die! He couldn't let her, not again!

That's when the dream changed.

"You never learn, do you?" A voice reached through the darkness surrounding him. Somehow, he managed to look up and saw a young woman in a Jedi tunic standing in the air as she glared at him. She had golden blond hair pulled back in a braid, fair skin with only a hint of freckling on her cheeks, and pale blue eyes that held no warmth for him whatsoever.

Still, her appearance cut through the blackness, and while the colors

didn't leave, they did calm. He only noted that in the back of his mind, otherwise focusing on the woman. He knew her.

"Siri Tachi?" he asked in confusion, ignoring the cracked, harsh tone of his voice.

A scoff. "I'm surprised you remember me," she commented. "After all the Jedi you killed." So, she was from his future. He didn't know (or particularly care) how his shell-shocked mind managed to process that.

"I never killed you," he commented dully. His brain refused to focus on anything but the loss of Padmé, only allowing inside other thoughts here and there. "Why are you here?" he heard himself voice emotionlessly.

"I'm here in Obi-Wan's place," she stated, as if it should have been obvious. Anakin blinked. Obi-Wan? But he'd only just been with Obi-Wan earlier that day. She sighed, and he suddenly got the impression of extreme weariness from her. Could spirits get tired? "He sent you back. I don't know how he did it, but apparently he believed in you enough to give you another chance."

"Obi-Wan… sent me back?" Anakin repeated, allowing that information to sink in. His Obi-Wan… his master still believed in him, after everything. A warmth began to build in his chest, chasing away the pain and shock a little. Despite himself, and he felt a small smile through the worry. "Where is he?"

Siri didn't answer. The silence began to feel foreboding, and he knew she wasn't telling him something.

"Tell me," he said suddenly.

"Don't you dare try to give me an order," she hissed.

He grit his teeth, then took a deep breath.

"Please…" It was harder to say that than he thought it would be.

She didn't lose the air of anger, but she seemed to deflate, words failing her, and she looked away from him again. Something had happened then… but what? What could possibly happen in the peace of the Force? He could not begin to comprehend any kind of danger from what he could remember.

"He's gone."

The finality in her tone left a gaping hole somewhere in his soul. Where he'd felt determination and desperation to save Padmé before, he just felt empty now.

"Gone?"

"The price for sending you back," her voice wavered with barely controlled emotion. "His soul from the future… it no longer exists."

The emptiness spread. "Gone…" he whispered.

"Best case scenario, he's given up his identity and memories to the Force. Worst case, he simply ceased to exist."

Why did it feel as if he'd been punched in the stomach? Obi-Wan shouldn't mean that much to him, s... *why?* "Why… why didn't he tell me?"

"Would you have accepted coming back?" Siri asked quietly.

"Of course not!"

She shook her head. "That's why. He wanted you to have your second chance. So he gathered as many souls of Jedi as he could – anyone who even remotely believed in you – and they all sent you back here." With that, she rounded on him, and he was surprised to see tears brimming in her eyes. "So don't you dare think to throw their sacrifices—*his* sacrifice—away, Vader."

He flinched at the name. "Anakin," he corrected quietly.

"Whatever," she snapped back, then fell into an awkward silence which she only reluctantly broke a few seconds later, voice still harsh. "I wasn't the only one who objected."

"You didn't want me to have a second chance?" he muttered, unsure how he felt about that. On one side, he certainly deserved the reservation, but on the other side, he couldn't help but feel offended at her attitude towards him. Couldn't she see he'd changed?

Then he turned to wondering why he even had to put up with her right about now.

"How can you even be here? I thought…" he faded off, confusion overwhelming him.

"When anyone dies, they lose their sense of self and became one with the Force? It's the truth. I almost did. I died in the middle of a war," she said, voice filled with sadness and more than a little regret. Pausing for a moment, she folded her arms. "I… am ashamed to admit that I was hoping he would die shortly after I did, and we could move on together, if he wanted. I kept my personality from fading through sheer will, but it wasn't enough. By the time you… " she faded off, noting Anakin's discomfort. "By the time the two of you parted ways, I could barely touch the world at all. Then he started studying the ways of the Whills. I could only glean so much from those teachings. It was enough so that I can remain here as long as I need to, but I can only appear in your dreams. I'll never be able to appear in the corporeal world as he could. Well, not to where anyone could see it."

He could? Anakin asked himself. Then the image of Obi-Wan and Yoda on Endor at the very end came to mind. Apparently, that wasn't a single instance exception. It may be prudent to seek out the ways of these Whills.

"Why did you accept, if you hate me so much?" he asked, feeling suddenly weary himself.

"I didn't want you to screw it up again," she replied, tone just a little too easy. "But when he asked me to at least do this," her voice softened again, "I couldn't say no."

Realization hit Anakin like a blow to the stomach, and he reeled from it. "You loved him."

She shot him a hateful glare, but didn't respond. Her silence was all the confirmation he needed. He stared blankly ahead. The idea of another Jedi falling in love—with Obi-Wan none the less—it boggled his mind. Everyone else had always been so… perfect. Well, in that respect at least. Of course *they* would never break the code.

But they had.

"I…" he started, but faded off, not knowing what to say.

"What? You thought you were the only one? The rules exists for a reason. You're not the first, oh Chosen One, and you won't be the last."

"Did he love you?" Anakin asked. The question escaped him before he realized he'd even thought it. He suddenly had to know. "Did he?" he prompted a little harder when she didn't answer.

Siri contemplated him for a while, studying him hard before shrugging her shoulders as if to say 'why not?' "He had feelings for me," she acknowledged. Anakin's mind reeled and he felt himself slowly slide into shock. "I don't know if I would call them 'love'," she continued then shot him a hard look. "And we weren't about to find out."

He didn't answer… couldn't answer. Obi-Wan? Oh sure, he'd known his Master had been attracted to a few people, but another Jedi? It just didn't… add up. Obi-Wan had been the perfect Jedi. He'd always followed the Council, always followed his orders, always followed the code…

Always.

At least, that's what Anakin remembered.

Exactly how well had he known Obi-Wan after all?

"Listen," he heard Siri say and somehow made his head turn towards her. Wasn't this supposed to be a dream? Why did it feel so real? "I'm here to warn you," she continued. "This dream you've had… it's no different from last time."

A slice of fear shot through him. Padmé dying and all associated feelings rushed back in on him.

"How… ?"

"I'm dead. You'd be surprised at what knowledge I do and don't have access to."

"But-"

"Don't," she said shortly. "I'm here to tell you that your dream last time came about because you were so fixated on it. You did not strike the killing blow to your wife then, but by turning, you may as well have. You took away her reason to fight, and then she gave birth to two extremely powerful Force-sensitives. The sheer exhaustion for a non-Force-sensitive doing that after the emotional stress you gave her… no wonder she died." She couldn't have injured him more if she'd turned a lightsaber on him. Those words hurt far more than any physical torture ever could. And then her icy glare came back to him. "If you're not careful, you may bring about her death this time as well."

He read the meaning of her words, but his abused mind refused to accept it.

"So you're telling me to sit by and do nothing?" he asked, ignoring the anger creeping into his voice.

"Of course not." Her tone plainly stated the supposed obviousness of the words and robbed him of his increasing hostility. "Obi-Wan wouldn't have sent you back if you were supposed to do nothing."

"But-"

"I can't tell you what to do, so don't bother asking," she waved her hand as if to casually bat away a fly. "I probably wouldn't even if I could. This has to be your decision, and I've given you as much help as I can." Or wanted to, her posture said plainly.

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Y-you can't just leave me with that!"

Her gaze somehow cooled even further. "Do you think you can force me to do anything, 'Chosen One'?"

His lips moved up and down in disbelief, but even he saw the truth in her words. What could he do to her? Kill her?

"How can I go about changing everything when I've only barely changed myself?!" he yelled, once again feeling that horrible pressure he'd used to live with on a regular basis. Being the 'Chosen One', and then the 'Hero without Fear' and finally, Darth Vader.

Maybe he just wasn't cut out to be a leader. The responsibility… it killed him.

"That's just it," she replied, tone softening. "Keep changing."

"But-"

"I'm leaving," she interrupted, apparently having reached her limit of dealing with him.

He just stared at her, unable to say anything.

"Good luck, Skywalker," she said finally, saying his name as if it pained her. "I don't think Obi-Wan was right, but..." her lips thinned, "I want him to be."

And then he found himself sitting up on the couch in Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan's apartment, in his nine-year-old body with sweat pouring down his face and back. He hated waking up like that. It hadn't

happened in far too long, one of the few things that his perpetually temperature-regulated suit had been good for, but it wasn't a sensation he'd ever really forgotten.

Untangling himself from the sheets, he was on his feet in seconds. He didn't wait to calm down. Something he'd done had changed events, and it was up to him to fix them.

They'd locked the door to keep a better eye on him, but this wasn't the first time he'd ever picked a door lock at the Jedi temple. It took him a few minutes longer than it should have (such primitive locking technology, and it had to be dealt with completely differently than future locks), but all in all he had little trouble getting out of the room.

Once outside, he looked around, making sure the hall was empty, and turned left. The Jedi Temple had its share of nocturnal species among its ranks, so he proceeded carefully, sneaking along and avoiding almost everyone with ease, even taking into account how clumsy he could be in this newer body. He wasn't sure whether he should be surprised that he still remembered so much about the temple, its layout and even shortcuts. To him, this building hadn't been in use for over two decades, but he had been intimately familiar with it.

He reached the lightsaber practice room without incident, and checked to see that it was empty before he slipped inside. Once the doors shut, he allowed himself a nod of satisfaction and relief before striding determinedly across the room. If he were caught sneaking around, the Jedi would automatically jump to the worst conclusion. Just coming here was an enormous risk in and of itself, but it was for Padmé. He'd do anything for her.

Then again, that's what he'd thought the first time.

He hesitated at that thought, hand frozen half-way between himself and the cabinet that held the extra lightsabers. The practice of making extras or keeping those blades of Jedi who had died in case of emergency wasn't always encouraged to the extent Anakin thought it should be, but there were enough that one wouldn't be missed.

But he paused, wondering if this were the correct course to take. Siri had warned him against rushing into things, and she hadn't been the only one. And for maybe the first time in his life, he listened.

Would taking a lightsaber bring about Padmé's demise? Or could he stop it from happening? What had changed? Why would she die? *How*

would she die? There had been a distinct sense of danger and malice. Another person then. But why?

The answer was there, right in front of him. He knew it. But his still shock-muddled mind refused to process any of the information. He'd just have to think on it later. For now, he needed a lightsaber. She would be walking into battle. He needed some way to protect her.

His hand inched ever closer, and had almost touched the handle, when a voice behind him caused him to jump and whirl around.

"Need to practice, do you?"

"Master Yoda!" he blurted out. "W-what are you doing here?"

The little troll actually chuckled at him. "My home this is. Come here often, I do. Ask the questions, I will." He hobbled up to the locker and Anakin, who backed away slowly. "Tell me, why you are here?"

Once again, Anakin debated his options, and once again concluded that the idea of a somewhat edited truth would end the best. This could really mean the difference between becoming a Jedi and being sent to the Agricorps (he tried not to shudder).

"I… had a dream," he said slowly.

"Oh ho," Yoda cocked his head questioningly, even as he reached up with his gimmer stick and closed the door to the lightsaber locker. Anakin felt his fists clench in frustration.

Funny how quickly frustration can be turned into anger.

"Scare you, it did?"

Anakin tried his calming techniques, reminded himself that this would only be a slight setback at worst, and focused on the smaller being.

"Master Yoda," he said with as much calm authority as he could muster. It wasn't much, but he hoped it would be enough. "Ever—" he paused. He'd been about to say "ever since I was young", but a child his age wouldn't say that. So he revised the words, mentally congratulating himself for catching that. "For as long as I can remember, I've had dreams that come true."

Yoda raised an eyebrow. "Oh?" he said. "All dreams, you say?"

Anakin shook his head. "No, Master. Just certain dreams… special

dreams. They have a different… " he paused, trying to find the right word, "feeling," he finished lamely.

"And a special dream this was?"

Well, at least he was succeeding in sounding childish. "Yes, Master."

The bat-eared alien watched him calmly for what felt like forever before he moved away from the locker towards the bench. "Come," he said.

"Master?" Anakin asked, hating how uncertain he sounded.

"Call me 'sir' you should. No longer a master have you." Anakin felt his lungs hitch, and his organs twist. How could he know? Had he figured it out already? Did he just mean a Sith master, a Jedi master or…

Anakin paused, calming down slightly at the next thought: a slave master. He felt sure that's what Yoda had really meant. Mentally he berated himself. If he had any chance of pulling this off, he'd have to stop jumping to worst-case-scenario conclusions and then taking those conclusions as fact. He took a deep breath. There was no way Yoda could know… was there?

"Stand there all night, will you?"

"Sorry Ma—er, sir," he said with a shake of his head, and he hurried to where the green Jedi had seated himself on an observation bench.

"Sit here you may," Yoda gestured with a kind expression to the empty space beside him.

Trying not to act nervous, Anakin lowered himself onto the bench where Yoda had gestured.

"Why sit here, sir?" he asked.

"A good bench, it is," Yoda responded. If Anakin didn't know any better, he would have sworn Yoda of all people had just made a joke. "Now, tell me this dream, you will."

Anakin found himself torn between two emotions. First came his reaction to the other's order. He'd never done well with orders, from Jedi or anyone. Especially not from Palpatine. Oh, he'd followed those orders, but he'd hated every second of it – which is, of course, what a Sith should want, so he'd never seen a problem. He did not want to

start following random orders now.

At the same time, he realized that this might be his only chance to gain the trust of the Master before him, and perhaps secure the necessary equipment.

The second feeling won. Barely.

"Very well, Ma—sir," he said, then unclenched his teeth and began his description.

It didn't take long for Anakin to explain the dream (minus Siri Tachi), and when he finished, Yoda just sat there staring out into the center of the room quietly. As a reckless Jedi, Anakin had hated long, still silences. As Vader, he had come to appreciate the pauses that silence could bring, as it usually meant he could work through just where the most recent Jedi escapees or rebels had gone.

Now he found himself reverting back to the former habit, unable to keep his thoughts from running wild as Yoda refused to speak. Couldn't the old Jedi say *something.* After a while, he realized he'd take anything; a rejection, a confirmation, even an 'I don't know' would do.

Still, the small master stayed still.

It became increasingly hard to keep quiet, but he forced himself to, clamping down on his feelings hard before they, too, could be turned into anger. It would just be another path to the darkness that he only barely managed to escape.

Finally, Anakin couldn't take it anymore, and he stood up. He wouldn't give the little troll the pleasure of hearing him ask what the dream meant or for any insight. He knew where that path led – nowhere. Besides, he already knew everything he needed to. He'd just have to—

Of course, that's when the Jedi Master deigned to speak. "Hmm, disturbing this is." Anakin briefly wondered if the old creature was a closet sadist. Here he'd waited for… far too many minutes in any case, and that was all the answer he got?

"No offense, Master," he couldn't keep some of the sarcasm out of his voice, "and I thank you for listening," that was sincere to make up for the sarcasm (he hoped); he still needed to get into the temple to stop the future from happening, "but that particular conclusion was not difficult to draw."

"So impatient, are you?" Of course, that had always been Yoda's main complaint about him in his former life, well, besides the fear thing. The parallel didn't help his mood. "Trust your vision, I do. Given by the Force, it was."

Anakin felt mild surprise sap away the frustration that had been bubbling inside of him. "Master?"

"Not your master, am I," he chuckled again and hopped — actually hopped — off of the bench to stand next to Anakin. "But escort you back to Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan's quarters, I will."

The former Sith shot one last longing, troubled look at the lightsaber cabinet before he realized he didn't have much of a choice. So, once again trying to keep himself calm, he turned and followed the old Jedi, empty handed.

They walked at a remarkably slow pace, and Anakin couldn't help but think that this was just another form of torture from the master.

"Tell Qui-Gon of this dream, you should," Yoda commented after they'd reached the hallway. "Take precautions, he will."

"That won't help," Anakin muttered. It slipped out before he could stop it. He'd been doing that far more often since he'd come back than he had in all the previous decade. Had something gone wrong? Or was it just his child brain? Taking the memories of a 47-year-old man and shoving them into the brain of a nine-year-old couldn't be healthy. He doubted he'd be able to process his surroundings nearly as well...

And wasn't that a horrifying thought?

"Why say that, do you?" Yoda's voice dragged him back to the present. Was it just Anakin, or did the troll actually sound surprised? Quickly, he pushed the thought from his mind, focusing on the question he'd been asked. He struggled to find an answer. 'Because a Sith Lord waits there to fight and kill them' probably wouldn't work too well. He only barely recognized yet another instance of his old sense of humor making a rather miraculous return.

He had to come up with an answer soon, or his silence would look suspicious. "Uh… another dream I had," he said quickly. So much for honesty.

"Oh?"

Yoda did not believe him. He sounded earnest, interested and somehow innocent all at once, but Anakin knew the bat-eared creature had figured out he hadn't been entirely truthful. He bit his lip, waiting for the coming confrontation nervously. It never came. This subversion of his expectations would be the death of him long before Sidious ever got to him.

"Tell me of this dream too, you will?" It had been a question, but Anakin still felt himself bristle as if he'd just been given a command. *Calm down, Skywalker!* he told himself.

"Very well, Ma — sir. This particular dream occurred… earlier. It showed Ob — Padawan Kenobi and Master Jinn fighting the creature from Tatooine. The red and black one," he clarified, hoping it made him sound more like a child. Yoda didn't acknowledge anything, so he tentatively moved on. "They kept fighting him, but he had a lightsaber on each end of his hilt, and easily kept up with them. Then something happened, Obi-Wan and Master Jinn became separated, and the thing killed Master Jinn. Then Padawan Kenobi killed him."

Well, it was close enough to the story he'd read. Obi-Wan had never told him. Not that he could really blame him now. Some things were just too painful to discuss. To bad his original younger self hadn't understood that.

"Hmm," Yoda commented, his words interrupted by the 'clipping' sound his gimmer stick made on the hard floor. "Care for Padawan Kenobi, you do."

Anakin hid a flinch… or he tried to. Somehow, he got the feeling that he couldn't hide it from Yoda. Well, truth (mostly) had gotten him this far. "I… I am still unclear regarding that," he said quietly.

"I see," the older Jedi turned and regarded Anakin, looking him up and down. "Hiding something from me you are," he said finally. Again, Anakin winced. Yoda continued. "But sense your intentions, I do. Want to save the Queen, you do?"

Anakin blinked down at the other. "Of course, Master."

"Feel that help you accomplish this, a lightsaber will?"

Not even a hint of hesitation traced his voice as he answered. "Yes, Master."

"Trained with a lightsaber, have you?"

Anakin weighed his options yet again. "A little," he responded vaguely.

"Life-long, lightsaber training is."

"Yes, Master. I know this too."

Yoda paused and regarded him for a minute. Anakin hated it when he did that. "Hmm, telling the truth on this, you are."

They walked the rest of the way to Qui-Gon's quarters in silence. Despite their slow pace, they showed up at the apartment far more quickly than Anakin thought they should. Had he been that lost in thought?

"Sensed you are gone, Padawan Kenobi has. Master Qui-Gon has not. Talk with him, I will." Again the bat-eared Master chuckled, as if to laugh at his own joke. Anakin didn't know whether he should roll his eyes or just ignore it. He chose the latter.

"Take this, you should," Yoda said as he knocked on the door with his gimmer stick. Anakin felt something hard and smooth come to his hands and looked down to see a cylindrical object just as Yoda let go with his other hand. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped despite himself.

"Y-your own lightsaber, Master? B-but I cannot accept this! I-"

"Give it to you, I did not. Return it to me, you will." There was the Yoda he always had known. The fierce but calmly determined Grandmaster from the best (and worst) of Anakin's memories.

For a moment, the former Sith could only stare at the object as he and Yoda waited for one of the two Jedi occupying the quarters to come to the door.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Believe in you, I do."

He couldn't comprehend what he was hearing. "Believe in me? But you have only just met me! The entire Council can't decide what to do regarding me, and I could very well be a spy. How can you believe in me?"

Yoda shrugged. "Because a good person, you are."

What?! In what lifetime?

"How can you think that?" The words left Anakin's mouth before he'd realized he thought them.

The old master raised an eyebrow in his direction. "Willing to give up your desires for another, you were. Mark of a good person, this is. Have more faith in yourself, you should."

Anakin shook his head. "I can't."

Yoda chuckled again. "You will."

Anakin opened his mouth to disagree again, but the door opening cut him off. On instinct, Anakin hid the lightsaber inside his tunic, away from view and looked up at the towering figure in the doorway. Qui-Gon stood, looking rather surprised, at the pair of them.

"Anakin?" he asked.

"Found him wandering, I did," Yoda said. "Keep a closer eye on him, you should."

"How did you get out?" Qui-Gon asked Anakin, turning his confused and rather worried gaze on him. "I locked the door."

"Important, that is not," Yoda said. "His word, have I, that leave again, he will not."

Anakin bristled at the supposed command, but appreciated the cover nonetheless. "Forgive me, Master Jinn," he said, bowing.

"Bid you all good night, I will," the grand master said as he turned and walked off.

"Thank you for bringing him back, Master," Qui-Gon said, his quiet voice carrying down the hall.

Yoda didn't even turn around. "Welcome, you are. Rest, you should."

Anakin walked inside the door, only barely catching a glimpse of Obi-Wan heading back to his room with a shake of his head. He also caught the rise in wariness from the young man.

"Anakin," Qui-Gon started once he'd closed the door, but apparently decided to change what he'd been about to say. "We'll discuss this in the morning."

"Yes sir," Anakin replied, going back to the couch.

His over-taxed brain seemed to have remained in the slight state of shock from the recent events. It didn't take long for it to shut down.

Thankfully, he had no further dreams that night.

xXx

Padmé stood, looking out at the Coruscant sunset from her quarters, unable to chase away her depression. It was easy enough to say she'd go back and do something, but what could she really accomplish? The Jedi had informed her that they would accompany her if she chose to return, but what good would that do against an army? A small strike team should be able to get into the palace, but then what? It wouldn't take long for reinforcements and droids to blast into whatever room the Viceroys had set themselves up in, even if the strike team managed to corner them. With what she knew of them, she had little doubt they'd be found in the throne room.

She needed a distraction, and that could only happen with an army. There were just too many droids otherwise. And the Senate refused to lend her an army before they got word from the Jedi sent to inspect the situation. She could wait, she supposed, but what she'd told the Senator was true: her people were dying, and it galled at her to sit here in luxury and do nothing because there was nothing (or very little) she *could* do.

It always seemed to boil down to resources. She just didn't have them.

She heard Jar-Jar come up behind her, seeming far more subdued than she'd ever seen him before.

"Yousa thinkin' yoursa people gon ta die?" he asked.

She held in a sigh. "I don't know."

"Gungans get pasted too, eh?" he said, sounding almost as depressed as she felt. So that's what had been bothering him. Suddenly, she felt far closer to the clumsy Gungan than she'd ever thought she would. They were in the same situation. The only individuals who were in a position to save their people, and they couldn't do a thing. He undoubtedly felt as useless as she did at the moment.

"I hope not," she replied, offering what comfort she could.

He paused for a moment, then spoke again, sounding far more confident and determined than he had before. "Gungans not dyin'

without a fight. Wesa warriors. Wesa got a grand army."

His words hit like a hammer to her heart. Army? The Gungans had an army? They'd always seemed so peaceful and reclusive. The thought of them having an army… it seemed ludicrous, but at the same time completely plausible. Why hadn't she thought of that before?

"That's why yousa no liken us, mesa thinks," he added.

Like a one-two punch, the second comment surprised her. The Gungans thought the humans didn't like them? Whatever had given them that idea? As far as she knew, they didn't approach the Gungans because the water dwellers didn't much care for the Naboo.

"Jar-Jar," she said, slowly turning to him after several moments of quiet. "Would your army stand and fight for the planet?"

"O' course!" the Gungan answered without hesitation.

"Would they be opposed to working next to humans?"

He hesitated, scratching his ear nervously. "Mesa canna say. Would be up to da big bosses."

Just then, the door opened and Captain Panaka walked in, looking extremely displeased.

"My Lady, the ship is ready to leave when you are, but I must protest to this yet again."

"Your protest has been noted, Captain," she said. "Inform Senator Palpatine and Chancellor Valorum that we are leaving."

His frown deepened, but Captain of her guard bowed respectfully and left. "Jar-Jar," she said, turning to the amphibian. "Will you help me convince your people to fight?"

He looked sheepishly down. "Mesa glad to help, but mesa probly not mucha help."

"Thank you. Any help is appreciated. I only hope it will be enough," she said, nodding her head in gratitude before she turned and walked out the door.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, I would like to thank my friends who let me bounce

ideas off of them, my beta reader(s) who gets me my chapters when I need them (LOVE YOU Amidala Skywalker and Khalthar!) and everyone who has read this! Thank you! *hug*

Please let me know what you think!

Preperations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin sat next to Artoo in a daze as he waited for the preparations concerning the familiar, Nubian ship that would take them back to Naboo to be finished. The first major difference between this timeline and his last had finally come to pass: The council hadn't ousted him.

He'd stood there, in front of Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon, fully expecting the Council to outright reject him again, and all they could say was that they hadn't made up their minds.

It seemed both anti-climactic and mind-blowing all at once.

And the irony was by no means lost on him. When he'd first come to the temple, ready and willing to learn and completely devote himself to their lifestyle, they'd rejected him. Now that he had been a Sith Lord, wanted nothing to do with their actual philosophies and only cared to stay so long as it took to change the future, they couldn't seem to decide.

Actually, now that he thought about it, the simple term of "irony" didn't seem to encompass the sheer wrongness of the whole situation.

"Master Windu spoke to you?" he heard Obi-Wan's voice behind him, coming closer, and set his thoughts aside as he focused on his former (future?) master's words.

"He said that most of the council is leaning towards rejecting the boy," Qui-Gon replied. Anakin looked over to see the pair approaching, probably to await the arrival of the Queen.

"What did you tell them, Master?"

Qui-Gon looked over at Obi-Wan for a moment before answering. "I told them I would take the boy on as a padawan learner."

At first Anakin felt nothing but a numb shock from the younger Jedi. Then, the sheer pain through the Force hit the former slave like a Star Destroyer going into hyperspace, and he reeled from it. Rejection, betrayal, sadness and just the barest touch of anger all rushed through the surrounding atmosphere like a rabid mob before being dispersed

into the Force.

Had all of that come from Obi-Wan? Mr. Control himself? Anakin couldn't believe it.

"You are more than ready for the trials," Qui-Gon said sadly, but kindly to his rather shaken padawan. "And he is the Chosen One. I will see him trained."

The emotion that hit Anakin this time was only and echo of the previous starship, but, yet again, he felt it from Obi-Wan nonetheless.

The padawan glanced over at Anakin, who tried to look busy with Artoo. Resentment, fear and was that... *jealousy*? Just *how* could Obi-Wan be jealous of him? "The boy is dangerous. They all sense it, why can't you?"

The betrayal Anakin felt this time did not come from Obi-Wan, and he couldn't help but send a dark scowl in his former master's direction. The padawan wasn't looking at him anymore, which just made him angrier and he grit his teeth. Obi-Wan had said that before, he remembered. This particular view point was not a new development.

Although, that begged the question: why had Obi-Wan taken Anakin on as a padawan? That had always been a sore point to Anakin in his younger days. What had changed Obi-Wan's opinion so much? It had to be something to do with Qui-Gon's death, but no one would ever really tell him. Eventually, he'd just stopped asking.

"The boy's fate is undecided," Qui-Gon said shortly, "and uncertain. The Council will decide Anakin's future. That should be enough for you. Now get on board."

With another pang of betrayal from Obi-Wan, the padawan turned around and stalked towards the ship. Anakin couldn't help another flash of anger, both at Obi-Wan and at Qui-Gon's statement that the Council would decide his future. He would not allow anyone else to decide his future again. Not the Council, and not Palpatine.

And most definitely *not* Obi-Wan.

Maybe he really should just forget about rejoining the pathetic excuse for a peace-keeping organization. Most likely, he'd just end up with Obi-Wan as his master again. Obi-Wan, who apparently didn't want to have anything to do with him. And Anakin still couldn't figure that out. And why was Qui-Gon so adamant that he be trained? Just

because he was supposedly the "Chosen One"? Yes, that had turned out so well last time.

"Anakin?" Qui-Gon asked, breaking through his thoughts.

He looked up at the Jedi Master, and felt the urge to ask. "Why did you say that?"

"Say what?"

"That you would take me on."

Qui-Gon smiled as he knelt down so as to look Anakin in the face. Anakin's own look darkened. He hated it when people looked down on him.

"I said that because I see so much potential in you," he said.

Anakin glanced after Obi-Wan. He supposed he could see why the padawan had said what he had. If Obi-Wan had done that to him, it would have hurt... a lot. He probably wouldn't have had anything nice to say either. The thought didn't do much to make Anakin feel better. "So, you wouldn't want to take me on if I weren't this 'Chosen One'?" he asked softly as he turned back to face the older man.

Qui-Gon's expression sobered, a troubled light entering his eyes. "The laws and rules exist for a reason, Ani."

With effort, he ignored the nick-name. "Why am I an exception?" he asked.

"Anakin," Qui-Gon started, but the former slave shook his head.

"I shouldn't have done this. I shouldn't have come," he looked away, angry at himself for not acting on the obvious. This path would just bring back too many bad memories for and bring out too many bad traits of everyone involved. He should have just left them behind.

"Why do you say that, Anakin?"

Anakin turned his glare back on the Jedi Master. "When you make exceptions to the rules, everything suffers. Everyone."

"Not always," Qui-Gon protested, his voice never gaining Obi-Wan's hard edge.

Anakin closed his eyes, focusing on his breathing to calm the anger. It

kept calling to him through the dark side, like an old lover. Oh, how it wanted him to come back again. He felt like a pod whose power couplings had failed; pulled in so many different directions only to crash spectacularly in a devastating display. Everyone seemed to be after him – everyone wanted him on their side. Had he brought this all about just by being born? Just by having that much raw potential?

"I would give this power away if I could," Anakin whispered harshly.

"What?"

The anger kept pushing, and he was having a difficult time keeping it in check. "Everyone wants me for what I can do. They all want to control my life." His eyes turned hard as he looked back up at Qui-Gon. "I'm not going to let that happen."

The Jedi sighed, his face gaining the thoughtful expression again. "You notice far more than you let on, Anakin. The only thing I can do is answer you honestly. Yes, I noticed you because you have Force potential. I would hope that I could have freed you whether you had such potential or not, but I do not know if that would have happened. The Jedi are already stretched thin and I cannot take on every evil in this universe any more than you can. The only thing I can do, is follow my heart and try. And right now, my heart says you need to be here."

"What if my heart says something different?" Anakin retorted.

Qui-Gon actually smiled and ruffled his hair. "Then you must follow it."

Well, that had not been the answer he'd expected. "Even if it takes me away from the Jedi Order?"

"Even if it takes you away from the Jedi Order," Qui-Gon replied with a confirming nod. "Always remember that your focus determines your reality."

In that moment, his respect for the older man shot up. He'd underestimated the Jedi... badly. Not that he was always an excellent judge of character, but still.

There were still some sore points in Anakin's book concerning this man though. He'd just opened his mouth to voice them, when the Queen walked onto the landing platform. Noticing, Qui-Gon stood greeted her. Anakin closed his mouth with a shake of his head. Typical Jedi: the mission always came first.

He very firmly did not think of how that had practically defined Darth Vader.

"It is our pleasure to continue to serve and protect you," the older man said with a slight bow.

"I welcome your help," she responded, falling into step beside him. "Senator Palpatine and Chancellor Valorum fear that the Federation means to destroy me."

"I assure you I will not allow that to happen," Qui-Gon said as they ascended the ramp into the ship.

"Neither will I," Anakin vowed quietly to himself as he followed. No harm would come to her. He would see to that.

After all, it was the least he could do for what he'd done to her.

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The ship's passengers slept in the uneasy silence as Anakin crept towards one of the cargo bay areas. He'd seen Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan practicing their katas at various points of the trip in the largest of the two cargo rooms on board the ship. If he avoided practicing in that one, he should also avoid detection from the Jedi. And he needed to practice... *badly*. It had been weeks since he'd even picked up a weapon with the intent to either use it or practice. Since before he'd come back, really.

Truth be told, he'd been avoiding it. The dark side had always come most easily as he fought. Now, though, he had no choice. He had to get used to fighting with his new childish body (as well as real arms and legs) if he were to protect Padmé.

Locking the door to the smallest of the cargo bays behind him, he took a deep breath and walked to the center. It would be difficult to practice some of the more *involved* moves in here, even with his diminished height, but the privacy would be worth it.

Taking another calm breath, he closed his eyes and reached for the Force. It answered his call, and he easily fell into a basic stance as he heard the familiar snap-hiss of Yoda's lightsaber and felt the even more familiar heat in his hand.

Two minutes and six near face-plants later, he felt like throwing the weapon through the wall.

Forget flesh arms and legs giving out on him, he could barely pull off even the most basic katas right now... and he couldn't figure out *why*. Nothing felt familiar, despite the fact that he *knew* he was doing it right. Form V had always been his favored style, and he knew it better than almost anything else, including flying. How was it that he could not swing into the basic stances?

It had to be his height, he realized suddenly. He'd realized that there might be some disconnect, after all, a child's body had different proportions than an adult body, especially a mechanical adult body. He hadn't realized it would be *this* bad.

Muttering a few choice words in Huttese, he sank to the floor in frustration, trying to fight off depression. How could he protect Padmé when he could barely hold the stupid weapon without slicing off his own head? Or maybe he'd do Dooku a favor and cut his own hand off early.

Funny how quickly depression can be turned into anger.

Slipping the saber into his shirt, he sat in a meditative pose, focusing on his breathing and banishing the rage to the Force. If he picked up the weapon now, it would be that much more difficult to reject the dark side. Although, he doubted that said aspect of the Force would help at the moment even if he wanted to use it. The Bogan only granted power, not immediate skill.

"What are you doing in here?" a familiar voice asked from near the door. Apparently, the internal locks on this ship weren't all that good. Anakin's eyes snapped over to where Obi-Wan stood, barely visible in the dim light, as he eyed the time-traveler warily.

"Uh..." Anakin looked around, glad that he'd put the saber away. "I couldn't sleep."

Obi-Wan cocked his head slightly. His ridiculous padawan braid seemed to grow with the gesture. The thought seemed strangely amusing to Anakin.

"Why were you so frustrated just now?" Obi-Wan asked.

All amusement vanished like so much smoke and Anakin scowled. "None of your business."

Obi-Wan's expression flattened. "Right. Sorry to bother you."

He turned to leave, and Anakin blinked in surprise. Obi-Wan *never* backed down like that. Ever. "Wait," he said, opening his mouth without really realizing he'd spoken. Yet another instance where he'd done that, so he made a mental note to work on it. He'd *have* to fix it.

Obi-Wan stopped and looked back at him over his shoulder expectantly. Anakin blinked, unsure of what to say.

"What?" Obi-Wan asked.

"How did you know?" Anakin asked, grasping at straws. He couldn't very well say 'it's not like you to walk away'. That would bring up far too many awkward questions.

"Know what?"

"That I was frustrated."

The Jedi's brow drew together slightly, giving him a rather confused air. "I just... could."

"Oh," Anakin said. They stood there for several seconds in an awkward silence broken only by the thrum of the ships engines.

After a few minutes, Obi-Wan cleared his throat. Anakin knew that sound. It meant he was about to make a tactical retreat. So he opened his mouth before the other could voice anything.

"You're right."

Obi-Wan blinked. "About what?"

"I'm dangerous."

The Jedi looked taken aback, and Anakin couldn't help but smirk. Anakin: One, Obi-Wan: Zero

"Is that a confession?" Obi-Wan asked.

Anakin shot him an annoyed glare. "Confession?"

"Why would you tell me you're dangerous if not to confess? Are you a spy?"

"No!" Anakin sighed, shoulders slumping under an imagined pressure. Part of him wanted to come clean to Obi-Wan and tell him everything. Part of him... *really* didn't.

"I saw it," he finally settled on, speaking softly. "In a vision." Or as close to one as he could get. He still wasn't sure it hadn't all been some horrifically real dream, even if that wasn't what it felt like.

Obi-Wan's eyes softened, although the rest of him looked like he'd been carved from stone for how much emotion he showed. "Is that why you want to stay with the Jedi?"

Anakin didn't answer. That wasn't the main reason, but it technically was a reason. The main reason he wanted into the Order was the fact that he wanted to change the future. As a Jedi, he would be in a position to do that.

But he had to answer and say something. "I don't want to hurt anyone," he whispered, not able to meet the other's eyes.

He heard Obi-Wan sigh, and the tightness he'd felt from the twenty-five-year-old eased slightly. "Master Jinn is going to fight for you. You will be trained."

Anakin scoffed. "Will that help?"

"Why wouldn't it?" Obi-Wan asked, sounding completely puzzled, as if that should have been an obvious answer.

Because it didn't before, Anakin thought. "I don't know," he said out loud.

"He'll train you," Obi-Wan said quietly. "He's a good master."

Instead of the pain and anger he'd felt from the padawan on the landing platform, he only felt the betrayal and a sense of loss from Obi-Wan now, but he felt it stronger than ever. A protective part of Anakin (that he'd thought dead long ago) reared it's head and he, once again, found himself speaking.

"He shouldn't have done that."

Obi-Wan looked back at him. "Done what?"

"Denounced you."

The padawan shook his head, sad smile coming to his face. "He only did what he believed was right."

"It's not fair to you."

Obi-Wan's smile gained a touch irony, turning it into something vaguely sardonic and horribly familiar. That was the Obi-Wan Anakin knew, which probably explained the thrumming ache in his heart. He couldn't help but wonder: Was this how his Obi-Wan had come into being? Through pain and heartache that would probably never heal?

Just how well had he known his former master?

"Life is rarely fair, young one," he said. "Master Qui-Gon may not be perfect, but no one is. Not Jedi, or senators, or any race ever born into this universe." Yes, that sounded *far* more like his Obi-Wan. "He hurt me, yes. But he didn't mean to... so I can forgive him. It might take me a while, but I can and I will."

"Why?" Anakin asked hungrily. That had hit a little too close to home, and he suddenly needed to know the answer, although he refused to consider why.

"Because," Obi-Wan said, that sad smile gaining just a twinge of hope, "I would rather swallow my pride and have him and his wisdom in my life than have my pride intact and become estranged over such a thing."

Anakin didn't quite know what to think of that. The idea of just *forgiving* like that seemed almost *foreign.* Obi-Wan had every reason to be angry at Qui-Gon, and yet...

Anakin had every reason to be angry at his Obi-Wan, and yet... Could he forgive his former master for his betrayal as easily as Obi-Wan had forgiven his master? Because whether he'd actually had betrayed Anakin or not, the former Sith could not seem to banish those feelings. He still felt so much resentment and anger towards Obi-Wan, and had a sneaking suspicion that he would whether it really had happened as he'd imagined or not.

Was just accepting and dismissing all of that the answer? Was it even *possible*?

"I don't know why I'm even telling you this," Obi-Wan said, now looking down at Anakin curiously. "We seem... connected somehow."

So it hadn't been just Anakin's imagination. Maybe they still had a bond of some sort? Could he actually bring that back in time with him?

"You really respect him, don't you?" Anakin observed, steering back to

comparatively less dangerous waters.

Obi-Wan smiled. "Of course I do. He's my master. The closest thing I have to a father... and he's a good man."

"Could..." he found himself pausing, yet another thing he hadn't done for decades. It was strange, having to force himself on again. "Could you forgive him for anything?" Anakin asked, not realizing how quiet his own voice had become.

"Anything short of turning to the dark side," Obi-Wan responded easily. "And even then..."

They stood there in silence again, but this one seemed far more expectant, and far less awkward.

"It's pretty late," Obi-Wan said finally. "Perhaps you should get back to bed?"

"I can't sleep," Anakin repeated. He wasn't pouting. He wasn't. Sith didn't pout, and neither did Jedi.

"I see," Obi-Wan said, obviously thinking. "Well, we could—"

"Could you go through your katas with me?" Anakin asked suddenly. Obi-Wan blinked. "I can't do more than the very basics right now," he said through gritted teeth, frustrated at the set back, "but even though I don't have a lightsaber, would you mind? It always clears my mind."

Obi-Wan looked taken back again. Anakin would count that as a point, but he somehow felt like he'd lost the scoring along the way.

"I don't see why not," he said finally, reaching down and unclipping his lightsaber from his belt. "But if that is what frustrated you, then you probably need to work with the balance of an actual weapon. Here, you can use mine. I am setting this on the lowest setting so you don't burn yourself... or me. I will know if you change it."

Anakin nodded, ignoring the stab of annoyance he felt at Obi-Wan's wariness all while feeling grateful that the padawan trusted him that far. It was an improvement. He accepted the lightsaber and switched it on. A brilliant blue met his eyes as the laser sword grew to full length.

"Do you know this stance?" Obi-Wan asked, holding up his hands as if to wield an invisible blade.

"Yes."

"Good," Obi-Wan said. "Follow me."

He and Obi-Wan ended up going through several of the basic katas. As they got further and further into the forms, Anakin was surprised to find himself feeling peaceful. He wouldn't admit how good it felt to fall back into habit, long forgotten and newly remembered. He also wouldn't admit how easily he had done so.

Chapter End Notes

AN: 2020 -- Soooo this chapter was 20 pages long. TWENTY PAGES. *ahem* Yeah, I don't like long chapters. Cut it in half.

Thanks to Khalthar and Amidala Skywalker for beta reading!

Revelations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Qui-Gon felt the vague presence approach and decided he'd better wrap up his meditation session. It couldn't be anyone but Anakin. Ever since the child had altered his shields, it had been much easier to find him in the Force, but only in fairly close proximity and the older Jedi found it just as hard as ever to sense the boy's feelings. It seemed he had taken Qui-Gon's advice to heart, and the Jedi Master had little doubt that in the future, Anakin would be a formidable opponent.

"Ma—er, Qui-Gon, sir?" Qui-Gon didn't blink an eye at the slip of the tongue, but he did take note of it. Anakin hadn't started out calling him 'master', so what had changed? Maybe he still thought Qui-Gon owned him? The thought caused him to frown and he made a mental note to bring the subject up later. Judging from Anakin's rigid posture, he had something on his mind.

"Anakin, come in. What's wrong?"

He winced, although Qui-Gon could feel only the slightest traces of embarrassment and reservation. Just how good was his shielding? Was Qui-Gon only feeling what Anakin allowed him to? If so, then his training had to have gone on for longer than a few simple months…

"You could tell," the boy responded in a flat, serious tone, as if he were reproaching himself.

Well, his self-esteem seemed pretty accurate for a long-time slave. And yet, he had mental shielding that would put most Knights (and some Masters for that matter) he knew to shame. He put on a mask of confidence, but it was the little sentences like that that would convince Qui-Gon that it was just that; a mask. An extremely good mask, but a farce none the less.

Qui-Gon had also come to the conclusion that the reason the mask was so good was because it had to be enough to hide the lack of confidence from Anakin himself. The Jedi Master knew from experience just how much easier it was to fool others when one worked at fooling themselves.

He raised an eyebrow at Anakin. "I meant it as a standard question,

but if there is something troubling you then please, come sit."

Immediately, Anakin did. The confident stance he took as he walked through the door, with his arms clasped firmly behind his back did not pass Qui-Gon's notice. He looked more like a soldier than a slave. Or both, perhaps?

"What can I help you with?" he asked, trying to be as non-threatening as possible. The last thing that would help the situation would be Anakin feeling forced into saying something. He needed to learn to trust to become a Jedi. One couldn't learn anything if one didn't trust their instructors or at least some of their fellow students.

For just a moment, Anakin seemed at a slight loss. Then his lips thinned into a determined line, and Qui-Gon felt just a touch of resignation through the Force.

"I have dreams," he said. Qui-Gon didn't say anything, waiting for an elaboration. "Whatever I dream comes to pass. Don't die."

Qui-Gon blinked. The sentence had been so unexpected, that the tone that would have otherwise been an order went completely unnoticed.

"Die?" he asked, still trying to wrap his head around the revelation. Did Anakin have the gift of foresight? Such a rare gift. The impressions from the Force during meditation that almost all Jedi had were vague at best, which is why most Jedi were encouraged to focus on the here and now instead of fretting about what might happen. But true foresight...

"Did you have a dream about me dying?"

Anakin dropped his gaze, confirming the Jedi's guess. Funny, he looked down to his left, indicating a conditioned response, but Qui-Gon felt nothing but earnest determination from him. So what was he lying about? Not Qui-Gon dying, but something related?

Correctly interpreting the silence as a hint to expound, Anakin continued. "Sometime after we land on Naboo, you and Obi-Wan will run across the Sith Lord again." Qui-Gon's eyes widened in surprise and more than a little apprehension. Where did Anakin learn that term? The Jedi Master most certainly didn't remember telling him. Yoda maybe? Somehow, he doubted it. He watched, well aware that Anakin had dropped any pretense of trying to act young. He was talking to Qui-Gon like he would to an equal. Where had the lack of self-esteem gone? Or was his mask just that good? Either unaware or

dismissive of Qui-Gon's thoughts, Anakin went on. "He'll fight you both. At one point, you and Obi-Wan will become separated. If you do not wait for him and decide to fight the Sith on your own, you will die."

Qui-Gon's mind reeled. Not so much from the revelation of his supposed death, but from the absolute certainty in the other's voice.

"I… see," he finally managed to get out. "And you are positive this will happen?"

Anakin nodded.

"And you know all of this because of a dream?"

This time he looked offended, and slightly panicked. "Why else would I know?" It seemed something connected to that sentence was being kept hidden as well.

Qui-Gon sighed inwardly, knowing the next part of the conversation would not be easy. "I told you before that I won't lie to you, Anakin. The council is worried that your former master may have been a Dark Jedi, or even a Sith Lord." Anakin blanched visibly. Ah, so the boy knew that some of what he'd been taught wasn't of the light. That either made him the spy Obi-Wan thought he was, or a reformed darksider. Either way, that didn't bode well for the boy's future at the Temple.

"I see," was all he said, his voice only barely strained.

Qui-Gon raised a hand to his beard, stroking it thoughtfully. "Did the Sith Lord from the planet – the one we're supposed to encounter – teach you?"

There was an unmistakable flash of pure hate before it was either squashed back behind the shields, or released into the Force. Qui-Gon felt his lips thin. That was not a good sign.

"Never!" Anakin insisted. Again, the Jedi Master felt nothing but pure truth from the boy. So the Sith hadn't taught him, but with that reaction, there was no way that Anakin didn't at least know of him. Did that mean he had been trained as part of the Sith Order? Qui-Gon shook his head at the thought. It couldn't be. Every Jedi knew that only two Sith existed; a master and an apprentice. But if Anakin knew the Sith, then how was he involved?

A rather unpleasant thought occurred to the Jedi. Perhaps he was supposed to be the apprentice Sith's replacement, or even a backup if said Sith died? That would definitely make sense. It would also explain why Anakin had wanted to come to the Temple where he wouldn't have to compete for a title. And if he hadn't learned under the Sith on Tatooine, that would make the black and red Zabrak the apprentice. Qui-Gon felt his stomach turn to ice at the prospect. The Sith he'd met had been no pushover. His master would be that much more powerful.

"Anakin," he said slowly, thinking how to best phrase the question he wanted to ask. "Did the same master teach both you and him?"

Qui-Gon had seen many facets of this child, but the complete and utter helpless expression was a new one. It was all the confirmation that the Jedi needed, but he remained silent none the less. Anakin's answer would determine his future. If he answered negatively, then Obi-Wan would be right, and he was most likely a spy. If he answered positively, though, then it would lend more credence to the 'reformed darksider' theory (as impossible as that was – people didn't return from the dark!).

Finally, the boy deflated, not looking Qui-Gon in the eye. He seemed resigned to a fate worse than death. Unfortunately, he probably wasn't that far off.

Qui-Gon's fears were realized when Anakin looked back up at him dully and he answered with one word:

"Yes."

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"And you know all this because of a dream?" Qui-Gon asked. Anakin heard the unspoken accusation, and had to shove aside the anger that rose inside him again.

"Why else would I know?" Immediately after the words left his mouth, he kicked himself mentally. Even as calmly as he'd said them, those words had been defensive, and the Jedi would notice.

Qui-Gon met Anakin's eyes firmly. "I told you before that I won't lie to you, Anakin. The council is worried that your former master may have been a Dark Jedi, or even a Sith Lord."

He knows! Anakin had to swallow the lump in his throat. *Oh Force,*

they all know! He should have known that even he couldn't pull this off! And if they knew, then Palpatine wouldn't be that far behind. He'd be on the run for the rest of his life! What about his mother? Or Padmé? Undoubtedly he'd put them all in danger too. *Again.*

"I see," was all he could manage. His voice refused to say anything else.

Qui-Gon raised a hand to his beard, stroking it thoughtfully as he scrutinized Anakin. They sat in silence for far too many seconds.

"Did the Sith Lord from the planet teach you?"

It took a moment for the words to sink in, but when he did, he nearly exploded. Maul? Of all people? Teaching *him*?! The notion went beyond ludicrous! The very idea of learning anything from that disgusting piece of—

He smashed the hate down, releasing what he could to the Force and shoving the rest behind his shields. He didn't doubt that Qui-Gon had felt that, but Anakin could only barely bring himself to care.

"Never!" he seethed. Again they sat in silence, and Anakin forced himself to calm down. Yes the very thought of ever being trained under Maul nauseated him to say the least, but it had been a legitimate question. Anakin couldn't help it though. He *hated* Maul.

Almost as much as he hated himself.

The pure rage melted into a sort of sad resignation. He almost snorted at that. Normally it went the other way around.

"Anakin," Qui-Gon's tone brought him back to the conversation. He'd figured something out. But what? What could he possibly— "Did the same master teach both you and him?"

The former Sith stared openly this time, feeling his face drain of color. *How*? This man had taken what few hints Anakin had, and then completely stripped his mind bare, leaving him completely naked and exposed. The numb shock on his face would give him away. He knew it, Qui-Gon knew it, and they'd both realized the other knew it.

Strangely enough, he felt relieved that his darkest secret had come to light. He still couldn't meet the Jedi's eyes. Shame and disgrace saw to that.

There was no point in hiding it anymore.

"Yes," he heard himself say and braced himself for the response. Funny, despite the effect this revelation would have on his plans for the future, he felt a strange sort of relief soothing over his soul. He hadn't felt this… light in decades. Like a weight he'd been carrying for years had been destroyed.

Qui-Gon gave a loud sigh and Anakin felt a touch of disappointment in the sad recognition that poured off of the man. "Oh Anakin," he said softly. Strangely enough, his voice held no accusation or judgment. "Why didn't you tell us before?"

He tried to imagine telling the Council that the Sith order existed, and that he'd been trained as one. Even now, he could see their plain dismissal. He'd be off for the Agricorps on the next outbound flight.

He shook his head. "You would not have believed me." He had a point, and, once again, Qui-Gon knew it.

The silence stretched between them again for several seconds before Qui-Gon broke it. "Thank you for being honest with me, but you have to realize that this puts all of us in a very difficult position." The former Sith almost snorted. Qui-Gon said it as if Anakin wasn't aware that already.

"I know," he said simply. What else could he say?

"What about the Jedi that you said taught you?"

What was he supposed to say to that? Well, he needed to try and do some damage control.

He hated damage control.

"That was true… mostly. I did have a Jedi master."

"His name?"

Anakin shook his head. The last thing he needed was to be put into a mental facility, drugged out of his mind to keep him from accessing the Force because of his delusions.

"You need to tell us, Anakin."

"I can't," he replied.

"Why not?" Again, his tone wasn't harsh, or demanding, but it had a grave tone to it that Anakin hadn't heard before.

"I just can't."

"Are you on orders not to say anything?"

Anakin blinked and looked back up at the man. "No. I'm not a spy."

"I want to believe that Anakin," Qui-Gon replied. He meant it too. "It would be far easier to sort this out if you would trust me enough to tell me."

That's what it boiled down to: trust. And at this point, Anakin could not bring himself to do it. He couldn't put his faith in anyone else, except maybe Padmé. But if he told her, that would put her in danger, and he couldn't do that either. So he remained stuck between an asteroid and a comet.

"I can't," he said again and got up. As far as he was concerned, the conversation was over. He'd already condemned himself, and Qui-Gon would just have to live with what he'd figured out up to this point.

Strangely enough, the Jedi didn't protest again. "Then can you promise me that you mean no harm to the Jedi or innocent civilians."

He didn't hesitate in his response. "Yes. I promise."

Qui-Gon nodded. "Then I will trust you, and I will be here when you can talk."

The sentiment meant more than Anakin would care to admit. Even if he couldn't accept it, an open invitation felt… good.

"Don't die."

Qui-Gon regarded him for several seconds. "Thank you for the warning, Anakin. I won't."

With that, Anakin left, too lost in his own thoughts to notice Obi-Wan's presence at the end of the hall.

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Qui-Gon watched the empty doorway for several seconds contemplating his decision. By all rights, the boy had just admitted to being a part of an order that encouraged pain and suffering. Mace

would have him locked away in the deepest parts of the Temple until they got answers. Even if they got their answers, Qui-Gon doubted the Council would let him go. Wasn't that why they were entertaining the thought of keeping him to begin with? Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. He had training, so it would be better to have him there in the Temple instead of out causing Force knew what kind of damage.

"Master?" Obi-Wan's voice broke him out of his thoughts. Qui-Gon blinked up at his padawan, unable to hide surprise. He hadn't expected Obi-Wan to approach him this quickly. Normally it took quite a while for his padawan to cool down and think everything through. He focused on the bond between them and realized just how worried the other would have to be before he came and checked up on his master.

Qui-Gon couldn't help but smile inside. "What is it, Obi-Wan?"

"Are you alright?" Obi-Wan put his hands together and walked forward, visibly agitated, although he tried to hide it.

"Of course, Padawan. Why would you think otherwise?"

"I felt distress from the bond. What happened?"

This time Qui-Gon allowed the smile to show. "Ever the perceptive one, Padawan. Anakin just told me something rather disturbing."

Obi-Wan glanced back over his shoulder for just a moment as if to confirm that Anakin wasn't there before he turned and took another few steps forward. "What did he tell you Master?"

"He told me some things about his past, and he also told me about a dream he had."

The Jedi apprentice blinked. "Dream?"

Qui-Gon nodded. "Apparently he has prophetic dreams."

"Prophetic?" This time he turned fully around and faced the door. "What happened in the dream?"

This would not be easy, but Qui-Gon felt that Obi-Wan had a right to know. He smiled grimly. "He said that I died on Naboo; killed by the Sith from Tatooine."

Obi-Wan's head shot around so fast that Qui-Gon wondered if he'd given himself whiplash. "What?! Master—"

The older Jedi held up his hand. "I do not fear death, Obi-Wan. Neither should you. However, I believe he warned me because he didn't want me to come to harm. He told me that I died because I became separated from you and tried to take the Sith on alone." This time his smile turned reassuring. "I won't do that, Padawan. And now that we know of the probability of facing the Sith again, we can prepare."

"Prepare?" The younger man eyed him suspiciously. "You want to turn this into a meditation session somehow."

Qui-Gon smiled again, grateful that Obi-Wan had broken the tension. "Again you show your perceptive nature."

Instead of arguing or refusing as he would have not a year ago, he sighed in resignation and sat down in a meditative pose. "Very well, Master."

Qui-Gon re-seated himself and put his hands on his knees. He had a lot of apprehension to release to the Force. He also had a lot of worry. Worry over whether he would live to see Obi-Wan knighted, worry over whether he could fight a Sith Lord and still keep the Queen safe, worry about Obi-Wan and his reaction to everything, and worry over whether he'd made the right decision to trust Anakin.

He spared one more glance toward the door before clearing his mind and reaching for the Force. He'd made his decision to trust the boy, and he wouldn't go back on it now. Dark side or not, he still believed that he was the Chosen One, therefore he had to believe Anakin would make the right choice.

"Master," Qui-Gon opened his eye to see Obi-Wan looking away. "I'm sorry for my behavior. It isn't my place to disagree with you about the boy." Qui-Gon waited, feeling that his apprentice had more to say. "I see now that I may have misjudged him."

Qui-Gon felt a ping of amusement at the irony at that statement. Just when Qui-Gon had been able to deduce Anakin's darker past was when Obi-Wan decided that he'd miscalculated. Why the sudden change? What had happened between the two? Part of him wanted to ask, but part of him didn't want to poison the truce the two of them had come to.

"And I am grateful you feel I'm ready for the trials," his young apprentice added on, softly.

The Jedi Master smiled warmly. "You've been a good apprentice, Obi-Wan. Don't sell your feelings short. You are a much wiser man than I am. I foresee that you will become a great Jedi Knight."

Obi-Wan looked up again, meeting the other's eyes with a grateful smile. "Thank you, Master."

With their bond restored, they fell into meditation, releasing their emotion into the Force and preparing for the oncoming storm.

Chapter End Notes

Oncoming Storm...the Doctor?! *hides and ducks rotten tomatoes*

Also, if anyone goes to read the comments, they're really for the next chapter. This is the second half of a chapter that was much too long... SOOO, yeah... fyi. As for the shorter chapters... this is honestly about 10 pages long (my norm). Yes? No?

Only three chapters left. The next two chapters are some of my favorites. :)

Thank you my Lovely Beta Readers!

Failure

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They landed on Naboo without difficulty. Anakin had forgotten just how incompetent droids could be. If they had tried to land on a Separatist Planet during the Clone Wars in the Nubian cruiser without bothering to try any evasive maneuvers, there wouldn't be enough of them left to burn in the atmosphere. However, the response to shoot first and ask questions later had to be programmed in. Apparently, the Trade Federation hadn't done so yet. The droids didn't learn like humans, and so their lack of action made them incompetent in his mind.

Stormtroopers and clones were so much better to work with. And that said quite a lot. There was also no satisfaction in destroying a droid.

Anakin avoided the rest of that particular line of thinking.

After his confession to Qui-Gon, he found himself waiting for the Jedi to inform him that he would be placed under some sort of arrest or watch, but the order never came. That didn't put his mind at ease. Actually, it did just the opposite and Anakin began to get jumpy whenever he felt the presences of the other two Jedi at all. The longer nothing happened, the more nervous he got.

As they traipsed through the jungle towards the sacred area the Gungans had retreated to, Anakin began to wonder if Qui-Gon would confront him at all. He'd taken everything Anakin had spoken of so well, responding honestly and without sugar coating anything, but also calmly and with an open mind. It was so unlike the Jedi he remembered (he could practically hear his Obi-Wan's sigh of disappointment and frustration as he looked at his padawan)... Would Qui-Gon even tell the Jedi Council? The man had been known as a maverick, even years after his death, one who hadn't trusted the Council much (not that Anakin could blame him). Could Anakin have gotten out of this scott free?

Alright, even he couldn't delude himself into thinking that, but it was still an interesting line of thought to follow.

Eventually, he was able to push his worries and thoughts aside for the

moment in favor of focusing on the tasks at hand.

Like keeping Padmé safe.

Not three hours after they'd left the ship, the Gungans agreed to help them. As Padmé stepped forward and knelt before the Gungan leader, Anakin could only watch in amazement. How was it that the love of his life could beg for her people's lives and still look like a regal Goddess? Instead of his opinion of her falling at such undignified actions, it soared to new heights. She had the strength of character to do what she needed to do despite her pride, and she knew when her own dignity came second.

He didn't know if he could ever do that. That kind of humility was something Anakin had never managed to learn. Truthfully, he realized it would probably be something he would never get the hang of. After all that had happened, his pride was about the only thing he had left... and he didn't have much of even that. At least she had a good support group, a loving family who would help her no matter what and adoring people to back her up. She could afford to be weak to be strong.

Anakin laughed, quietly grim. Fabulous. Now he'd begun to stop making sense even to himself.

It took them a little over a day to set up a base camp and gather the leaders of the tiny rebellion groups that had sprung up all over the planet in protest. Anakin scoffed when speeders came back loaded with people. None of them could be that good of a rebellion if they'd been located that quickly and easily. He only accepted them because they needed the manpower rather desperately.

They also got an unexpected surprise call just after the first groups had shown up. A Jedi named Traavis had landed on the planet not a week before, and volunteered to help the Naboo pilots cripple the droid ship. He had his own fighter as well as a few followers with their own ships. After a short conversation, Padmé, Qui-Gon, Panaka and Traavis agreed that the young knight would meet the others in orbit when the attack started. Anakin couldn't believe their stroke of luck. Had Traavis been on Naboo in the original timeline too? If so, why hadn't they been able to contact him the first time? Or was this just another difference? What could have brought about such a change? Anakin had no idea, but he wasn't about to look a gift-nerf in the mouth. Instead, he found himself grateful that someone else with Force senses would be up there helping to take out the droid control

ship, thus leaving him free to focus on saving Padmé.

He slept surprisingly well that night.

They infiltrated the capital not an hour after dawn. Panaka led their group of rebellion members in as a second group entered through a more main area as a distraction. After the signal, they attacked, drawing the droids' focus while Panaka, Padmé and the Jedi led their group of pilots to the battle hangar.

It was a good plan; simple but effective. They got to the hangar with little resistance.

Of course, as soon as they opened the doors, it became a light show of laser bolts zooming through the air, only to be stopped by blue and green lightsabers. Across from them, droids fell, parts scattered and what few people were there quickly vacated.

"Anakin, find cover!" Qui-Gon insisted. Anakin shot a glare up at the older man. His first instinct was to tell the Jedi 'no'. He gave orders, he didn't take them. "Quickly!" Qui-Gon insisted. Annoyed at having to listen but seeing the sense in the command, he gave in (reluctantly) and found a ship to hide in as he had in the previous time line.

"Get to your ships!" Padmé yelled somewhere behind him. Once situated in the cockpit of his own ship, he watched as droids and humans shot each other down and glowered. It had always seemed wrong to him when droids fought living, breathing creatures. Yes, both sides had their advantages, but the side with the droids didn't lose people. They didn't lose *life*. It took a lot of control to ignore the anger that burst forth every time someone fell to the ground, their life-force either fading or snuffed out.

It brought back memories. Instead of the Naboo hangar, he would be on a random planet, fighting to keep his troops alive. That, in turn would trigger another memory, which led to another and then another. Time after time, he saw different battles in his head. It skipped from the Clone Wars to different planetary disputes he'd been a part of as a Jedi, to Rebel and Imperial dog fights and back. The images came back in surprising clarity that had him cringing mentally. He hadn't had flashbacks this intense for over a decade.

Unwilling to just sit there and be of no use to anyone, he began to reach out with the Force as subtly as he could, using the power to throw off a droid's aim, or to ruin a droid's blaster. With Maul, Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan and one unknown Jedi around, he didn't dare use it

more than that. To do so would give away too much.

Then, with a whoosh, the ships began to fly out of the hangar bay in yellow streaks.

"May the Force be with you," he muttered as the last of the vehicles finally left. He'd helped save the Gungan army (and consequently the planet) last time. He could only hope he wouldn't be needed this time, because he wasn't going into space.

Finally, the fighting inside the hangar ended as the last droid collapsed to the ground. Not two minutes later, the second rebel group came rushing through the door to rendezvous. The two teams rallied and began a quick discussion to decide where to go next.

"My guess is the Viceroy is in the throne room," he heard Padmé say.

Panaka nodded. "Red group! Blue group! Everybody, this way!" With that, they all moved towards the door; Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan following behind. Anakin watched warily. Maul's presence kept approaching their position, and it made Anakin nervous. Neither of the two Jedi seemed to notice, though.

Finally, Anakin stood up, trying not to sound incredulous and exasperated. "Master Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan," he finally said. The two looked up at him as the group walked past his fighter.

"Anakin," Qui-Gon started, but the boy cut him off.

"He is there!" he practically yelled as he pointed at the door. Could they honestly not feel him?

Everyone else stopped and looked between Anakin, the Jedi and the door while Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon exchanged glances. Then, as one they dropped their cloaks. Qui-Gon nodded at Anakin before turning to the Queen. "Is there a back way?"

"Yes," she replied, looking rather confused. "But it's longer."

"Take it. Obi-Wan and I have some business to attend to."

She didn't look happy about it, but she accepted his advice with a nod and led her group over to a side exit. They hadn't gotten more than a few steps when the main double doors began to separate.

"Anakin," Qui-Gon glanced back up at the cock pit, "stay there."

Anakin didn't reply. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan apparently took that as an affirmation, and turned to face the dark figure standing in the entrance as they ignited their lightsabers. Maul, somewhat surprised that the Jedi seemed to have sensed his presence, also dropped his cloak then wasted several seconds of theatrics switching on his own double blades. The fool.

Padmé's group hurried away from the three Force users as the two Jedi launched themselves at their opponent.

Of course, that's when the shielded droidikas had to show up, shooting at Padmé's group as they hurried out of the hangar. Unlike last time, though, Anakin knew exactly what he was doing when he turned the mounted guns of the ship on the group of droids, wiping them out easily so the others could keep going.

It took much longer than Anakin thought it would for Maul to lead the Jedi out of the hangar bay. This time he got stuck watching them fervently fight the Sith. He noted that Obi-Wan wasn't using Soresu. Strange. When had he changed from Form IV to Form III? Anakin made a mental note to ask the Jedi later as he watched them take the fight out of the docking area and into the bowels of the palace.

The moment Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan disappeared from view, Anakin hopped over the side of the ship and ran after Padmé's group as he brought Yoda's lightsaber to hand. Artoo's whistle stopped him.

"I am going after Padmé. Follow me if you wish." Ignoring anything else the droid said, Anakin turned and sprinted through the door, feeling for Padmé's signature and anything else that might be dangerous.

He would *not* lose her again.

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Traavis knew something bigger was going on down below. He sensed it strongly. Yes, the Queen would try to trap the Viceroy and that was the main plot, but this felt different... even bigger than that somehow, and far more sinister. He could sense a battle between light and dark, undoubtedly Qui-Gon, his padawan and the Sith. They'd mentioned something about the darksider they'd encountered before being on the planet. Of course. What were the odds indeed.

Focus, he told himself. He wasn't a padawan that could afford be distracted by vague happenings in the Force. He was a knight, and he

would do what he had to do to take out the droid ship and save the natives fighting for their lives and land below.

Strangely enough, Qui-Gon had also mentioned something else to him, something about the deflector shield probably being erected around the main transmitter, not the main reactor deep inside the ship. It was risky, but possible to get inside the ship and destroy the whole thing if he could time it right.

How they knew that, he had no idea. He wasn't a risk taker, and didn't like dangerous plans. He was, however, a Jedi, and he would do what he had to do to save these people. If that meant flying on a suicide run, then so be it.

The dogfight had already started with a vengeance by the time he and his pilots reached the ship. They immediately shot for the control station, lending aid when they could.

The minutes crawled by as Traavis watched for an opening, all while trying to stay alive amidst the storm of laser fire. A twinge in the Force finally nudged him towards just the right spot, and when the opening came, he took it.

Sucking in a deep breath, he dived past the ship's defenses and blew almost directly through a hangar door that had let out a squad of small, droid-controlled ships just before the bay shield came back up.

As he did his best to dodge the pillars of support, large machinery and other immovable obstacles, he came to the conclusion that Qui-Gon, or whoever had come up with this idea, was completely insane.

He found himself more surprised than ever when it actually worked.

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It wasn't difficult for Anakin to follow the Red Group that scaled the outside of the Theed Palace. A few well-placed Force-enhanced jumps and he landed on the ledge they'd broken into the upper floor from just in time to see them get captured by the droids. He watched as they laid down their weapons hesitantly and put their hands up, eyeing the droids nervously. This, Anakin realized, would be the best time to take Padmé out. Glancing around and reaching out with the Force, he stood back against the wall near the shattered glass, searching the surroundings carefully as the group was led down the hallway. Then, carefully, he followed.

They came across only two pairs of droid guards, both of which Anakin took out easily once the main group had passed. It wasn't difficult to crush them as they weren't moving or shooting at him, so he used the Force to compact their bodies and left them in sparking heaps. The group ahead didn't even notice. Not that they would. Droids. They were amusing to work on, convenient most of the time, but otherwise tended to be rather unreliable. Yet another reason why he preferred working with clones and other intelligent species.

Except for Artoo. Anakin looked around, finding it strange that the robot had not chosen to follow. Or if he had, he was just too far behind. Strange for the little droid. At least from what Anakin could recall.

Even as he ran along with the blasters he'd taken from the downed droids stuffed uncomfortably into the waist of his pants and his shirt, he kept looking for the danger that would supposedly claim Padmé's life.

Nothing happened. They'd almost reached the throne room by the time Anakin finally lost all of his patience. He had to be near her if he was to protect her, so he did the most logical thing he could think of.

"Padmé! No!" He ran at the droids, only to be knocked aside easily, landing at Padmé's feet. Just as he'd planned.

"Anakin?" she asked worriedly, bending down to check him over. "What are you doing here? Are you hurt?"

"I'm sorry," he said as he threw himself at her, clinging onto her shirt. "I know I was supposed to stay in the ship, but you were in trouble!" Her eyes widened as she felt a blaster slip into her hands. Surprised, she looked down at Anakin for a few moments before allowing a smile to show on her face. She hid the blaster in her sleeve, and then her face had gone back to a mask of weariness.

"Your Highness," Panaka started, but a droid cut him off.

"Get moving!" it said, stepping forward with its blaster raised threateningly.

"Captain," she said, nodding to Anakin. "Take him."

That was the last thing the time-traveler wanted, but apparently she knew he had more weapons to disperse. Looking perturbed and rather worried himself, the captain walked over to them, and drew Anakin to

his side as the group shuffled into the last hallway leading to the Throne Room.

To his credit, he only stumbled once when Anakin slipped the blaster to him as well. It only took a few subtle Force manipulations to cause slight noises and distract the robots' attention as the rest of the blasters were passed around. Really, Anakin almost found it too easy.

The Trade Federation's Viceroy and his advisor met them in the large chamber, both looking all too smug. Anakin couldn't remember which of them was which. It hadn't mattered when he'd killed them...

"Your little insurrection is at an end, Your Highness," one of them said, addressing Padmé. Anakin's fists clenched, previous regret at the thought of striking them down forgotten. How dare they speak to her like that?! "Time for you to sign the treaty and end this pointless debate in the Senate."

"Viceroy!" A new voice sounded from outside of the Throne Room. Rabé stood outlined in the doorway, clad in the Queen's battle dress and backed by at least 30 men and women. "Your occupation here is at an end!" She held out a blaster and shot down two droids before their masters had the opportunity to order them into action.

Anakin couldn't help the smug smile that appeared on his face as the Federation Representatives' shock and anger poured off of them in waves.

"After her!" the one that had addressed Padmé before yelled. Droids quickly filed past them and into the hallway. Seeing this, the group outside made a hasty retreat. Still angry, the Viceroy glared over at Padmé. "This one's a decoy!"

Anakin couldn't help rolling his eyes. Honestly, decoy or not, you didn't send most of your force out to capture something and leave barely a skeleton crew to guard the leaders. The depths of their stupidity made some of the moffs he'd known look intelligent. No wonder Palpatine and Dooku could lead them around so easily.

As soon as a good amount of the droids had left the room, Padmé nodded over to Panaka, and tossed her blaster to one of the other men before sitting down in the Queen's chair and pressing a button. One of the arms opened to reveal a small supply of blasters, which she quickly began tossing to the other unarmed members of the group. Keeping one for herself, they made quick work of the remaining droids.

"Jam the door!" Panaka commanded two of the men, both of whom nodded and rushed to the doorway.

Something's wrong, Anakin thought. He'd heard these events told by Padmé herself, and each time she portrayed the Federation representatives, she would describe them as on the verge of panic; frightened cowards. The two beings that stood surrounded by the rebel group, who had been so shocked before, still seemed surprised, but also as calm and arrogant as ever.

"Now, Viceroy," Padmé said, "We will discuss a new treaty."

The two trapped beings exchanged a glance before the one who had done most of the speaking again opened his mouth in that strange way.

"I do not believe so, Your Highness. You may have taken us by surprise momentarily, but did you honestly think that we would not be prepared for your plan?"

He couldn't pin point it! Why?! Anakin's eyes flew over the room as he whipped around and practically threw his senses out to try and find the problem.

It came to him far too late.

A warning shrieked at him through the Force just an instant before it happened. The entire side window nearest Padmé blew in with a localized explosion. Everyone ducked away from the harmful blast, throwing their arms around their heads in protection. The only one who didn't shy away was the only person in the room able to feel the dark intent bent on the woman he loved.

The figure that swung through the window, a woman — a bounty hunter of some sort judging from the dark body suit and small personal arsenal she wore — raised a hand with a blaster in it and shot at the Queen.

"NO!" Anakin screamed and rushed at Padmé, pulling out Yoda's lightsaber, at first immensely grateful for the weapon. Then he realized he would not be able to intercept. He'd been standing at the wrong angle, behind and several feet away from Padmé, next to Panaka. Frustration rose in an enormous wave. What had been the point of risking so much to acquire the weapon if he couldn't even use it?!

It all happened in slow motion. Padmé — who had deflected the transparisteel and other material flying in her direction by throwing her arms up — peeked out from behind her hands and looked over at the window sill, creating a clear shot. The Captain realized what was happening too and began to rush in Padmé's direction only moments after Anakin had started. The other men scrambled back in confusion and the Viceroys slid off to the side, not bothering to hide their smug pleasure at the situation.

Anakin reached her first, practically flying as he hoped to knock her to the side and out of harm's way. He'd forgotten that as a 9-year-old, he did not have the mass necessary to do anything other than cause her to stumble.

The blast struck true, and Anakin could only watch in horror as Padmé gasped in pain and fell back onto the floor. The light had already begun to fade from her eyes when she hit the ground... and Anakin could only stare in a numb shock.

In the distance, he vaguely heard the Viceroys protesting, stating that they needed her alive while the men all looked on in silence. Panaka reached her side and began to check for vital signs. He started to yell out to the others in the group, but Anakin couldn't' hear him. All he could do was stand there watching them cradle her prone body.

He could only think one thing. The thought raced through his head over and over again, and he could do nothing to banish it.

He'd failed her.

Again.

Suddenly, nothing else seemed to matter.

Then his world exploded.

xXx

Kar'tchok'ig had a reputation for being the best of the best. She could kill anyone, or so she claimed, and she took any job as long as it paid enough.

So when she got the anonymous request to hit the Queen of a mid-rim planet with an advance payment that exceeded her usual fees, she couldn't turn it down. It had been simple enough to set up a plan once she'd heard the young leader had landed on the planet. Obviously,

she'd returned to reclaim her world. To do that without a large number of troops and ships for backup they would need a signed treaty.

That meant they'd be coming for the Viceroy.

So she made the plan to become their "bodyguard", and they'd accepted after consulting their boss. She had a sneaking suspicion the person who hired her and their commander were one and the same, but she didn't speculate. In her business, speculating and connecting the dots usually got one killed.

It happened just as she'd predicted, and she even had to commend the party that came into the Throne Room, supposedly as prisoners. They had thought it out well, and the group coming second as a distraction appeared at just the right moment.

Only when they had taken the Viceroys and jammed the doors did she act, setting off the small explosives that would tear through the transparisteel and duracrete like a vibroblade through Mukslk cheese. After that, it was a simple matter of swinging in and taking the girl out. None of the others would be a problem once their leader was dead. That's what her employer had claimed in any case.

She hadn't counted on the boy reacting so quickly. To the assassin's surprise, the child seemed almost unaffected by the blast. He caught on far quicker than the adults and took it upon himself to rush in and save the Queen. He reached her just as Kar'tchok'ig fired. The blast would have killed before. Now it only hit the girl's shoulder, knocking her back. The assassin cursed and took aim again, but the angle wouldn't be right for a straight kill, so she paused.

The two Neimoidians came forward, protesting. She paid the weaklings no heed. Instead, her focus fell onto the captain and the boy. The boy had a cylindrical object in his hand and just stood there, staring down at the wounded Queen. The Captain, Panaka if she recalled correctly, reached his leader's side and began administering first aid.

The others had only frozen or panicked when the situation had gone bad, so the only two people she needed to worry about were the two now closest to the Queen.

The child, it seemed, had gone into shock, but something about him seemed off to the assassin. Something seemed... *wrong*.

Even though he had not made a single move, all of her instincts told her to run (*from a child*, her mind scoffed), but she brushed the feelings off. After all, she had to finish the job. Grunting in frustration, she stepped to the side, aimed her blaster and fired again. The noise of the blasts seemed to jolt the kid out of his stupor. When the green, glowing blade sprang to life, Kar'tchok'ig began to realize just what kind of a mess she'd gotten herself into. The kid was a Jedi!

She took a step back as her bolt deflected off to the wall or ceiling. She didn't know which because her eyes remained on the boy.

She had come across her fair share of Jedi. They required special planning and extra care. Having one show up out of the blue was literally the worst thing that could happen. At least she could take solace in the fact that they rarely chased her, and would always attend to the wounded first. True protectors of the Galaxy.

At that moment, the boy seemed nothing like a protector. Slowly, he turned to face her, an expression of pure hate twisting his boyish features.

"How *dare* you..." he whispered, his voice harsh and low. She could have sworn his eyes had been a clear blue-gray color, but as he glared at her, she could see that they had turned to a harsh, almost glowing yellow.

Staring at those eyes, she felt a deeply rooted fear begin to rise in the pit of her stomach. She'd seen eyes like those. They would show her no mercy.

All he had done was turn to face her, but even that motion seemed ominous and threatening. For the first time in her life, she came to the conclusion that she would cut her losses and leave. She doubted she'd be back to finish this one too. But the moment she turned to move, she found she couldn't. That's when the fear turned into a sort of desperate terror. She couldn't move, and he kept coming towards her.

She looked to the side to see the same thing had happened to the Neimoidians. Just what was this kid? She'd heard Jedi could do amazing things, but this went beyond even that. Besides, she refused to believe that this kid was a Jedi. Jedi didn't do things like this.

He raised his hand and then closed it... and that suddenly, she couldn't breathe! Oh, and it hurt. Somehow, she didn't think anything was supposed to hurt this badly, but as he approached, with that green laser sword of his swinging down to the side, she realized that he did

it. He'd done something to draw out the pain. She had no idea what, or if that were even possible, but her quickly fading, oxygen depleted mind could supply her with no other answer.

Gasping for breath, she forced her eyes open. Fear gripped her heart in a way she'd never felt before. In her opinion, death had no meaning. So beings died. So what? She'd never really feared death, so she'd never really feared to go the extra mile in her jobs.

Right then, she began to really understand that some fates were far more cruel than death.

Just before she blacked out, the strange, invisible pressure around her neck released her suddenly. Not out of mercy, she could tell. No, he was playing with them – with her. Through her slowly returning vision, she could see him finger the lightsaber gingerly, as if wondering what he would cut off first.

Thankfully, he approached the Viceroy and advisor first. The weaklings backpedaled frantically, right into a corner.

Keep distracting him, she thought, prayed really. If any being out there could hear her, she begged them to keep the boy's attention away from her as she forced her protesting body to move. If she made it to the window, she could escape. Whether she died or — by some insane stroke of luck — actually made it away from the planet didn't matter to her. All she desired was to get away from that... *thing*.

He raised the saber to swing down, and the Neimoidians fainted at the sight. Doing so may have saved their lives, because the kid got angry.

Unfortunately, she'd gotten no more than a few meters towards the window when the pressure came back, grabbing her by the throat again. Gasping for breath, her body lifted into the air. Then the invisible force slammed her into a pillar, knocking what little breath she'd managed to recover out of her.

The boy approached her, hand outstretched.

Black spots began to dance around the edge of her vision.

Right about then, she realized she still held a blaster in her hand. With far too much effort, she raised the weapon and shot blindly in his direction. He deflected the bolts easily with the laser sword. That was when she noticed his expression had changed. Before he'd been angry and in pain. He now looked positively murderous. It was the strange

gleam in his eye that really caught her attention, though. He was *enjoying* this; seeing her in pain. Not in a vindictive kind of way. No, it went much deeper... as if he drew his very strength from her horror and torment.

She was going to die, she realized. Not a fast, relatively painless death by blaster, but a slow, drawn out death. Torture at the hands of this... child — this monster!

And for that moment, she did not see a child. It may have been her fading consciousness, or perhaps her fear and utter *knowledge* that this being would end her life that very day, but in place of the pre-teen she'd seen before, she saw a tall, dark figure with a horrendous, black mask. A black cape bellowed behind him, and a harsh, red laser sword had replaced the previous green one.

Blinking, she looked again and saw the hateful child with the green blade, but the image from before still remained burned into her memory.

She hadn't thought it possible for her fear to grow any at that moment.

She was wrong.

"W-who a-are you?" she managed to hiss a whimper somehow.

The slight figure locked gazes with her and leaned close.

"Vader," he leaned in and said in a child's voice, but it still sounded too deep; darker than a boy's ever should. "Darth Vader."

Chapter End Notes

I'd say I'm sorry for the cliffhanger... but I'm really not. ;)

Thank you to my lovely betas Amidala Skywalker and Khalthar!

The Dark Side

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Several light years away from Naboo, on Coruscant, Senator Sheev Palpatine stopped mid-sentence on live feed. This surprised many of those watching him, as he had a reputation for being the picture of a perfectly in-control man. The press had just gotten word of the Queen going back to their planet, and they wanted his opinion. As always, he'd been the confident senator, full of concern and worry for his home world… and then he stopped.

The group stood in silence for several seconds, and he still did not respond. Many news reporters exchanged glances, and one of them went so far as to speak out of turn. "Senator?" the reporter — a blue-skinned, female Twi-lek — said aloud. He didn't answer.

The small smile that appeared on his lips would not be visible to any regular onlooker. Indeed, only someone who knew him intimately would ever have had a chance at identifying the expression correctly, but it was, indeed, there.

"Senator!" the Twi-lek said again. This time, Palpatine heard them and seemed to jolt from a reverie.

For a moment, he didn't seem to know where he was, yet no fear or uncertainty entered his expression at all. "Forgive me. As you can see, this has affected me deeply, and I want the universe to know that neither I, nor the other Naboo will give up! As soon as the Jedi dispatched returns with the proof necessary, we will have our home back!" Nods of approval met his exclamation, and he continued on.

xXx

Jedi Knight Traavis felt the switch from light to dark on the planet clench at his soul. Even as he flew out of the exploding ship, essentially saving the Gungans as the droid army shut down, he knew something had gone horribly wrong.

With little thought to the cheering pilots over the com, he turned his ship towards the planet. He knew he would arrive too late to be of any real help, but that did not mean he wasn't going to try. He had to. He had at least two comrades on the planet, and he could not count

himself a true Jedi if he didn't.

xXx

In the Jedi Temple meditation room, Yoda's eyes suddenly flew open. Next to him, Mace Windu sensed his fellow Jedi's distress.

"What is it?" he asked.

Yoda looked up at him sadly.

"A grave mistake I may have made."

xXx

In the lowest mechanical and ventilation rooms of the palace, three figures whirled, twirled and traded blows with their lightsabers as they leapt and dove across the different walk ways intersecting the particularly large chamber. They'd been going at a break-neck pace for several minutes, the two Jedi playing tag-team against the Sith.

Then, as if on command, all three froze at the same time, halting their duel and staring unfocused ahead of them as if to confirm something they'd only just become aware of.

After only a moment, recognition caused the Jedi to go pale. To Maul's annoyed surprise, they exchanged glances. How dare they take their eyes off of their enemy? Did they underestimate him that much? The fools.

"Anakin," they said at once, and that quickly, the red and black Sith Lord was forgotten as they turned on their tail and ran. At first Maul found himself surprised. Then curious. Did they want to go and stop this new entity? This 'Anakin'? Then he felt the familiar, comforting rage. His prey had decided to try and run, for whatever reason. He would not allow that to happen.

"You will not escape me," the Zabarak hissed and took off after the Jedi. He would kill the pair of weaklings. Then he would seek out this new darkness and make it his own. With that kind of power backing him, he could easily take over and become the next Sith Master.

An anticipating grin split his face as the trio raced through the palace.

xXx

Vader looked up at the woman he had pinned to the stone pillar with

the Force. She had on enhancing eyewear, probably the kind that allowed for several different spectrums of vision, so he could not see the fear in her eyes. He could feel it though, and he reveled in it. What he could see of her face had already begun to turn a lovely shade of purple and she continued to struggle in vain, using up what little precious oxygen her body already had inside of it. He allowed her esophagus just enough slack to let in the barest trickle of air. It would keep her alive after all. And he wanted her alive. For now. It would make her upcoming death that much sweeter.

She would pay for what she'd done.

The dark side flowed through him in familiar waves, and he marveled at it. This is what he'd been so afraid of? This *power*? Oh, he'd forgotten how *good* it felt to be strong. For the first time since he'd come to the past, he felt like he had complete control of the situation...and he *liked* it. No, he *loved* it.

And right now, he *wanted* it.

How could he have ever fought this? Why had he avoided it when it held all the answers? It always had.

He could feel Obi-Wan desperately yelling at him from the back of his mind. Some people never changed. The weak old fool. Well, in this universe, the weak young fool.

And right then, he realized just what he could do. With the dark side as his ally, and his knowledge of the future, he could easily destroy Palpatine and lead the Galaxy into an era of *true* peace. With him at the head of course.

The Jedi would protest, but he would deal with that when the time came. Sidious would prove to be the more dangerous threat at the moment.

The difference was, now he knew it.

Oh, and Sidious would pay.

But first, this woman would. He approached, shutting down the lightsaber and holding his hand out further and clenching his fist. The already panicking woman opened her mouth, futilely trying to draw in air as he finally closed off her supply completely.

Death by asphyxiation had always been one of Vader's favorites. It

truly got across just how badly whoever had caught his attention had screwed up. The person would lose all sense of dignity as they lost control of their internal systems, causing whatever waste inside the body to be expelled. Anything left in the stomach would undoubtedly come up too if he could draw out the spasms – Vader tended to only like doing that when the issue was personal to him.

It was the least she deserved for hurting Padmé. The gaping hole where the woman he loved should have been in his life — in both lives — would never heal. He knew this from experience. So he used it. He turned that pain into anger, and hate, and rage. And he would enjoy every minute of it. As any Sith should. As he should.

A cruel grin crossed his features as he stepped forward again.

xXx

Obi-Wan had never been at such a loss before. He knew this feeling. He'd known it ever since he'd met Xanatos, Qui-Gon's fallen former apprentice.

This tainted *cold* that whispered false promises of power and gain was the very essence of the dark side. And he felt it coming from Anakin!

Sometimes he hated being right.

So why had he and Qui-Gon silently agreed to go racing through the palace with an enraged Sith Lord on their heels to try and help the boy? Why did he feel so strongly? He didn't know, and the other Jedi didn't seem to either.

"Obi-Wan, we cannot lead the Sith to the Queen," Qui-Gon said, his breath beginning to hitch.

"Master?" he looked over his shoulder for the barest second.

"Go to Anakin. I will distract the Sith."

Obi-Wan suddenly went numb. "What?! Master, no! If you and I get separated..."

Qui-Gon looked him hard in the eye, even as the continued to run. "I am not afraid to die."

"I can't lose you!" Obi-Wan insisted.

"You can," Qui-Gon said. "Because you're stronger than I am, Obi-

Wan."

"Master, no! We'll take him together!"

Qui-Gon shook his head. "And then what of Anakin? He is the 'Chosen One'! What will happen if the Chosen One falls to the dark side? You must stop him, Obi-Wan."

His mind urged him to accept his master's logic, but his heart wouldn't hear of it. A whisper told him that he could do little for Anakin at the moment anyway.

"I won't, Master! We'll face him together! We'll face both of them!"

Qui-Gon smiled. "I'd wondered where you'd gone, Obi-Wan." The padawan blinked at his master, unsure of just what the man meant. "Go, Obi-Wan. I'm giving you an order," Qui-Gon insisted again.

"I won't!" Obi-Wan responded.

His master looked at him, and Obi-Wan met the gaze with his own determined glare. Only two Jedi could glare at each other while running at break-neck speeds through a maze of hallways. Finally, the Jedi Master smiled, relenting. "Very well. Now!"

Somehow, he'd known. The Sith had to have known what they were going to do, because the moment they stopped, Obi-Wan felt a twinge of warning in the Force. He moved, but far too late as a heavy vase smashed into his head, knocking him down.

"Obi-Wan!" Qui-Gon's voice sounded somewhere above him, but he heard it as if through water. Colorful spots popped into his vision at random, and he fought unconsciousness. Great, probably had a concussion. Well, if he knew that he was thinking at least somewhat lucidly. Gingerly, he reached to the Force and released the pain and worry into it gratefully. It helped. A lot. His vision began to clear, and that's when he noticed his master fighting the Sith... alone.

Eyes wide, he struggled to get up, willing his vision to clear completely, going so far as to douse the area in the healing that was the Force. It complied slowly. He'd never been all that adept at Healing. Oh how he wished he'd paid closer attention to Bant's lectures now.

As he stood, the world swayed, and it was all he could do to stay on his feet.

"Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said through his grunting as he kept the Sith at bay, "stay down!"

Obi-Wan didn't listen. They both knew he needed healing, but the padawan couldn't leave the one person he cared about most to die at the hands of a vicious Sith. After a few seconds, his stomach stopped doing acrobatics and he straightened, drawing his lightsaber.

"Obi-Wan, no!" his Master said. It only took that moment of distraction for the Sith to knock Qui-Gon's blade aside, and stab him through the chest.

Obi-Wan felt it through the bond. He felt the shock, and worry, and pain and...acceptance.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" Obi-Wan screamed, ignoring the pain in his head, and he launched himself at the Sith.

xXx

Vader wasn't quite sure when Obi-Wan's yelling stopped being directed at him. He'd gotten used to tuning the Jedi Master out, so the silence didn't really faze him.

The anger did.

So much so, that he lost concentration out of sheer surprise and the woman fell to the ground gasping and coughing. Anakin paid her no heed, now focusing on that little part of his soul that would always be connected to his old master.

It was true. He could feel Obi-Wan's anger. Obi-Wan *never* got angry. He got upset, stern, annoyed all too often, and sad. That was all before he released those emotions to the Force. But even then, he never got *angry*.

And he never hurt the way Vader could feel he did. The sense of *loss* and *attachment*... It shocked him down to his very core.

At first, he didn't know what to make of the situation. He'd never even dreamed of dealing with such a thing because it was so implausible. 'Obi-Wan' and 'anger' didn't belong in the same sentence unless 'was' and 'not' or other terms with similar meanings came in between them.

Then a smile grew on his face. Obi-Wan was angry.

Jedi never got angry because anger led to hate, and hate led to the dark side. He could get Obi-Wan on his side. It wasn't that he *needed* the older Jedi with him, but taking Palpatine down would be so much easier if he had an accomplice with the same goals...

This younger, more malleable Obi-Wan made an ideal candidate. But first, Maul had to be out of the picture.

Despite the rage bordering on hate, the Jedi had yet to truly draw on the dark side, only allowing it to trickle in instead of embracing it. He also seemed injured somehow. At his current level of technique and power, there was no way he could defeat the Sith without fully drawing on the dark side anyway.

Use it, he urged through the Force, only just then noticing the growing mass of anticipation growing in his stomach. *Use the power...*

xXx

Use it, Obi-Wan almost allowed himself to become distracted by the impression that settled in the back of his mind. Almost. He could only allow a small portion of his brain to analyze the thought.

Vaguely he wondered just what he was supposed to use, but his focus on the fight at hand didn't allow for much else. All he knew was that he needed to avenge his master's defeat. He *wanted* to. Desperately.

Use the power...

He didn't care whether he was using power or skill or speed. He just wanted to end it. He wanted to end this *thing's* existence!

Even with his head pounding and throbbing, he matched the horned being stroke for stroke, only stopping when they broke away from the blows for quick assessments before launching attacks at each other again. Every time they took a step back from each other, Obi-Wan could see an anticipating gleam in the other's yellow eyes. It only served to make the Jedi angrier. His master's presence continued to fade and the Sith was *enjoying* this. Along with the anger, this realization brought disgust. How could any being think like that?

Obi-Wan decided then and there that he would do anything to cut off this creature's life. Anything.

Good... he didn't hear the word so much as glimpse a general approval, and it confused him. The thoughts felt distinctly alien to his

mind, like they came from a completely alternate source. But where?

That thought cost him. Taking his mind off of the battle at hand, for even a moment, was not something he could afford to do. The Sith sprang forward, and levered Obi-Wan's lightsaber out of his hand, sending it clattering behind him to lay next to the dying Jedi. Shock and panic stopped the padawan from doing more than widening his eyes before the Sith used a Force push to shoot him in the opposite direction of his master and weapon. He landed hard on his backside and slid into the base of a pillar. He let out a cry of pain as the pressure that had shoved him into the support column did not lessen.

Obi-Wan gasped, willing his winded lungs to do work. The Sith continued to advance slowly, obviously gloating at his victory.

For just a moment, Obi-Wan looked up and was filled with an anger and rage that he'd never felt before, and he reached for it. He needed something more to defeat the Sith, and he felt a hidden power there.

Then he stopped. Where had this sudden extra power gotten him? Pinned to a wall and barely able to breathe. Power didn't help, it corrupted. If he wanted to live through this, he'd have to calm down.

He had to *think*.

The Sith had not been able to cut Obi-Wan off from the Force, so there had to be something...

An idea came to him as he looked down the hall at Qui-Gon's prone form, and the two long, cylindrical objects lying in fairly close proximity...

If he brought either one of the ligthsabers to him with the Force, not only would it arrive too late, but undoubtedly the Sith would block it somehow. No, he needed a distraction.

Sending a glare up at the advancing figure, he reached out with the Force and grabbed at some decorative vases, drawing them towards the dark figure.

The Sith sliced through them easily, only barely losing a step and then shooting a look at Obi-Wan that said 'is that the best you can do?'

Obi-Wan's answering smile (more of a grimace), accompanied by a familiar snap-hiss, had Maul spinning around. The Jedi had activated his lightsaber with the Force and then brought it speeding towards the

Sith. The darksider brought up his own lightsaber just in time to deflect the weapon, then reached out with a hand and grabbed the hilt, deactivating the blade easily.

He was just about to turn to the Jedi, probably toying with the idea of killing the man with his own blade, when a sudden, warm pain blossomed in his chest. It took him a moment to blink and look down. A good foot of a green lightsaber stuck out from his chest.

Behind him, Obi-Wan gave the blade a good tug, drawing it out of his opponent's body and allowing the Sith to fall to the ground. It hadn't been easy, moving more than three different objects from different directions at the same time, but it had been worth it. When Maul had turned to face the lightsaber coming at him, he'd let the pressure holding Obi-Wan down, and the Jedi had caught the second, deactivated and unnoticed lightsaber. Then he'd gathered the Force to launch himself at the darksider, shoving it through his chest.

As Obi-Wan stared at the dying Sith before him, he shut off his blade. Funny, now that he'd accomplished his goal, he felt no satisfaction. Only a deeply rooted sadness.

It only took a moment for him to rush to his Master's side.

"Master..." he gasped.

"It... it's too late," the older Jedi managed to mutter.

"No!" Obi-Wan protested, shaking his head.

"Help him... Obi-Wan. Anakin... help him..."

The fraying bond snapped, breaking with a firmness that left no room for argument. Obi-Wan's master had died.

For the first time in over a decade, the padawan did something he he had thought he would never do again.

He cried.

xXx

Padmé didn't know quite where she'd ended up. All she knew was that it didn't matter. Somehow, she recognized that she'd fallen unconscious. The sharp pain in her shoulder probably had something to do with it.

"Padmé..." A voice called out to her. She turned to look over her shoulder, but her eyes found no one. Not that she could really see anything, but that was the closest she could find to the general concept of her searching out another entity.

"Hello?" she called. Her voice didn't echo at all, but still seemed to stretch away from her, moving forever towards an unseen horizon.

"Padmé..." the voice said again, louder this time.

A flash of a figure, a woman dressed in Jedi robes, crossed her mind. The next instant, it vanished like smoke drifting into the atmosphere. What had she just seen?

"Padmé..." It came again, louder than ever. It also sounded more strained than ever.

The image of the woman, a blond woman, came to her strongly before it vanished again, but this time, she caught and held onto the impression.

"I'm here!" she said. "Who are you?"

"You must reach him..." the voice whispered, floating in and out on invisible currents. She still wasn't quite sure she'd really heard anything or if her mind was somehow making words out of the whispers of a breeze.

"Him? Reach who?"

The voice returned, and she could tell it was definitely sapient. "You're the only one who can!" She sounded so desperate. "Wake! Wake up! Or there will be no hope. I can't accept that! I won't! Neither will you! Wake!"

She turned around in the white motion of her mind, but the presence had vanished. "Wait!" she called. "How do I wake up? Who are you?" But no answer came.

Frustrated, and more than a little worried, she sat down and thought. How could she make herself wake up? She'd never tried to consciously awaken herself before. How did one go about doing so?

The pain, she realized suddenly. The pain linked her to the real world. She needed it to take her there now.

Gritting her teeth, she turned all of her focus to her shoulder...

Gasping out a soft, strangled scream, she opened her eyes. Captain Panaka knelt above her, surrounded by several of the men who had accompanied her on the mission. He wasn't looking at her, though. Instead, his wide eyes stared over at something on the other side of the Throne Room.

Trying to ignore the agony screaming through her arm and chest, she forced herself into a semi-sitting position and followed his gaze.

Again a gasp escaped her lips, this one of horror.

It was Anakin. Sweet little, helpful, nine-year-old Anakin that looked like he was about to kill the woman laying slumped on the ground in front of him.

You have to stop him, the voice echoed through her memory. *You're the only one who can!*

Taking a deep breath, she opened her mouth and forced all of her energy into saying one word:

"Anakin!"

xXx

Vader felt Obi-Wan emotionally backing away from the dark side and hoarded a surge of anger. As ever, the faithful Jedi. If he would not turn, then he would only be a problem Vader had to fix. Nothing more. Shame really, but nothing the Sith couldn't get over.

He turned his attention back to the unconscious woman in front of him. Off to the side, the Viceroys lay unconscious next to each other. He'd have to take care of those pathetic weaklings too, and he would soon enough. First, though, he wanted this woman's life.

Just as he raised the lightsaber to strike, he felt Maul die. So Obi-Wan had managed to overcome the odds yet again. Even without the dark side — *especially* without the dark side — it was an impressive feat. There was no chance of Obi-Wan turning now.

He would go to his fatally wounded master and have the man die in his arms, as he had before. Vader tried to summon the disgust at such weakness... but none came. He frowned.

Then, unbidden, another image came to mind: the image of a young man dressed in black and pleading with him to stay.

"*You're coming with me!" he insisted. "I'll not leave you here, I've got to save you!"*

Stupid, stubborn and completely desperate, begging with his father in an unspoken plea. *Don't leave me!*

"*You already have,"* he'd said. He remembered how earnestly he'd felt that. Luke had saved him. Or had he?

Blinking, Vader looked down at the woman unsurely. He still wanted her to die. Shouldn't she pay the price for hurting — killing Padmé?

Then a voice behind him – an ever familiar, sweet and all the more desperate voice.

"Anakin!"

He drew a breath, not daring to hope. He'd been so sure... he'd *seen* her die... or had he? Whipping around, he saw several of the men crowding around Padmé as she struggled to sit up. Her face had gone pale, and she clutched at her shoulder, obviously in a great deal of pain, but she was alive.

"Padmé...?" he asked. He vaguely felt surprise that his voice came out high-pitched and youthful instead of harsh and mechanical.

"Anakin, it's alright. I'm okay."

He didn't know what to do. She was obviously in pain, and he was torn between taking revenge and going to her side. He was also torn between pitying Obi-Wan for his loss and killing him for not turning. Confused and at a loss, he looked between the guards, staring at him in a sort of awed fear he'd come to expect from people, and Padmé's pleading eyes. Then he looked between her and the woman lying at his feet.

Then he looked down at the green, glowing lightsaber in his hand.

Believe in you I do, because a good person you are.

The memory of Yoda's words couldn't have hit him harder if they'd been made from metal.

He backed away from the lightsaber as if it were a snake, letting it

clatter to the floor as it switched off. Then he took another look around the room, taking in the scene as if through new eyes.

What had he done?

What had he *done*?!

He'd Fallen. Again. He'd allowed his own personal feelings to obscure his judgment without even verifying that they were true. Just like last time.

"Anakin?" Padmé asked, sounding uncertain and coaxing.

Suddenly he had to get out of there. He had to get away. Away from her forgiving glance that he did not deserve. Away from the judgmental, fearful stares the men in the room continued to shoot at him. Away from the handiwork of the three unconscious enemies he'd been more than willing to murder in cold blood.

The door was still jammed shut, so he did the only thing he could do at the moment. Much to the horror of the others in the room, he turned and fled out the window, jumping onto a ledge several meters below before taking off along the moldings like they were made for just that purpose. He could not get far enough away, but he could try. He'd run until he could stop the guilt.

He ran for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Man, I didn't realize how long some of these chapters are! Sheesh!

Thank you betas! And to everyone reading this!

I used to have fanart here: meltintalle. deviantart. com(slash) gallery/#/d4a4113 but I dunno where it went. :/

Peace?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The rest of the day went by in a rushed daze for Obi-Wan. He wasn't sure if he lost track of the order of events after he'd brought his Master's body to the Queen. She'd seemed to be in a bit of a dazed shock herself, but despite that, she managed to start organizing and contacting who she needed to get the people out of the camps and back to their homes. The Gungans helped when they could, and Obi-Wan heard the Queen comment more than once that their help had been invaluable.

Jedi Knight Traavis showed up sometime after Obi-Wan had reached the Throne room with Qui-Gon's body. After a short, vague explanation, the knight went down to check the Sith's body and make preparations concerning the transport of the thing back to Coruscant. Obi-Wan couldn't help but feel relieved that he would not have to worry about doing it himself. He didn't think he could look at the Sith again.

No one seemed to know where Anakin was. If Obi-Wan had been in a more normal state of mind, he might have caught the fearful glances and strange whispers, but he'd long since simply fallen into an auto-pilot state that just kept him moving one foot in front of the other and only obeying what orders he managed to hear.

It didn't take them long to take down the communications block. As Obi-Wan approached the Throne room and the inter-planetary com it held, he couldn't help but wish it had taken them longer. He did not want to face this yet. The pain of his loss had receded behind a numb wall that he did not want to tear down yet.

But he was a Jedi, and he would not shirk from his responsibilities. Trying to put on a confident expression, he strode back into the room as he'd done several times that day. Traavis and the Queen were conversing with Master Yoda when he entered.

"Ah, here he is now," Traavis said, voice encouraging as he turned to his fellow Jedi.

Obi-Wan forced his feet to move towards the blue, static-filled image

of the small Jedi Master and bowed, thankful for the ingrained habit to fall back on.

"Master Yoda," he heard himself say, and hoped he didn't sound as empty as he felt.

"Sorry for your loss, we are," Yoda said softly. "A good Jedi, Master Qui-Gon was."

Every word stabbed through the wall, throwing sharp little slashes of pain back into Obi-Wan's soul. He refused to do anything but keep a straight face. "Thank you, Master."

"Report, you will," the hologram insisted.

"Of course, Master," Obi-Wan said and began his tale. He spoke with a monotonous voice and only barely listened to his own words so as to distance himself from the pain. Judging from the worried looks Traavis, the Queen and Master Yoda shot him, he didn't succeed.

Once he finished, he bowed low. "That is all, Master."

"Knight Traavis," Yoda turned to look at the other Jedi. "Confirmed you have, Padawan Kenobi's story?"

The brown-haired man nodded. "All of my evidence supports Padawan Kenobi's view of events."

Yoda nodded. "Very well. Arrive, we will, tomorrow evening. Inspect the body of this Sith, we will."

A touch of confusion slid through the numb. "Master, you are coming here?"

"Offered to honor Master Qui-Gon, the Queen has," he glanced at the Queen, who nodded and smiled sadly. "Hold the Final Ceremony on Naboo we will." Obi-Wan wasn't sure what to feel about that. On one hand, it was custom for Jedi to be cremated at the Temple. On the other hand, Qui-Gon would probably love for the ceremony to be held on a planet bursting with such life.

After a moment, he nodded. "Very well."

"Young Skywalker, where is he?"

Obi-Wan blinked, mind processing the question. "We have been unable to locate him master."

"It is possible that he left the Palace," Traavis started, but Obi-Wan cut him off.

"No... he's here."

Everyone turned to look at Obi-Wan. "How do you know this?" Traavis asked.

Obi-Wan thought for a moment, but his mind refused to support him with an answer. Finally, he spoke up, repressing a tired sigh. "I don't know."

"Find him, you should," Yoda said.

"We've asked the Queen to keep his presence here quiet," Traavis said softly, shooting a quick glance at the girl.

"I still don't like it," the Queen spoke up. "He saved my life."

"Necessary, it is," Yoda commented. "Grateful, we are."

She nodded, but Obi-Wan could still sense how put-out she felt.

"Talk to him, you must," Yoda insisted as he turned back to Obi-Wan. "In pain he is. So much pain."

Two sparks of feeling managed to reach Obi-Wan. The first was resentful of Master Yoda's statement. Anakin may be in pain, but so was Obi-Wan. Couldn't he heal a little before he went off to make sure someone else was alright?

But that isn't the way of the Jedi, he told himself. Besides, Qui-Gon would be the first person to volunteer to go. If Obi-Wan didn't, he would be dishonoring his master's memory.

The second feeling he vaguely recognized as worry. What had caused Anakin pain? Was it physical or emotional? Like it or not, he had a bond with the boy, and he needed to know if Anakin was alright, if only for his own peace of mind.

"Yes, Master," Obi-Wan bowed.

"Go now," Yoda dismissed. "Find him. Then rest. Yes, rest."

Obi-Wan nodded and left wondering just how he would find the boy. After a few moments, he closed his eyes and reached inside himself.

Yes, there. He could still sense Anakin, if only barely.

With a silent nod, he turned and began walk determinedly towards the north wing of the Palace.

xXx

It was amazing how large some buildings could be.

It had taken Anakin quite a while to leave the palace grounds, and even then, he'd only run into forest. After a while, he'd realized just where he was and that he needed to go back, so he'd (somehow) forced himself to turn and trudge back to the palace. Of course, that had taken him even longer, but now he sat just outside the hangar bay on an outcropping of stone, overlooking the preserved wild lands surrounding Theed. In the distance, he could hear the cheering and merrymaking of the Naboo as they returned to their homes. Their voices drifted on the air, filled with happiness, joy, thankfulness and an abundance of other positive feelings.

None of those emotions could touch him.

He'd only barely made it back to the palace just before the sun had set, retreating to the most isolated part of it. Exhaustion, both bodily and spiritually, convinced him to sit down. He hadn't moved since. That had been three Nubian time-blocks before. The sunset had been beautiful. He hardly remembered it.

For the life of him, he could not figure out how someone born with such innate power could be such a complete failure. He'd failed at being a Jedi, failed at being a Sith, failed at being a good husband, failed at fatherhood (in *so many* ways), and now, even with his knowledge of the future, he'd failed to hold to his convictions, and failed to protect anyone or change anything significantly. Qui-Gon had still died. Padmé had been hurt. Sidious was still a senator possibly running for Chancellor.

Anakin couldn't understand it. He had the power, the skill, the discipline... why couldn't he do anything? Well, anything that really counted in the long run.

Fortunately, he couldn't seem to muster the energy to feel much of anything. No anger, no pity, no worry, not even frustration. Not that it would have broken through the blanket of numbness that had settled over his little, black heart.

He should leave, before he really screwed up everything else. All he'd have to do was grab a ship and speed off. He'd find a way to make it. He'd find a way to change things for the better out there. He could... couldn't he? Then again, with his track record...

He almost scoffed at his own insecurities. Since when did he, the Chosen One, have lack of confidence? Seemed he failed at being the Chosen One too. Big surprise.

"Anakin?" a soft voice actually caused him to turn his head slightly. How could he have been so distracted that he hadn't felt anyone approach? Not that it mattered.

It was Obi-Wan.

But why would he be here? He had no reason to come looking for Anakin. In the previous timeline, Obi-Wan had disappeared for over a day while he'd come to terms with what had happened to his master. Anakin vaguely remembered that he'd come back a changed man. What had caused this divergence? He was pretty sure he hadn't been out here for an entire day...

Had Padmé sent him? No, he doubted it. Not after...

The Council. That had to be it. Probably something along the lines of 'go and find that kid and make sure he doesn't hurt anyone else!'

"The Council sent you," he muttered, not caring that his voice sounded emotionless and dead. Obi-Wan's eyes furrowed in concern and surprise. He didn't answer. Anakin didn't need him to.

"Anakin, you need to come back. Everyone is worried."

This time, Anakin remained silent.

Obi-Wan balanced expertly on the carvings decorating the temple as he climbed casually over to where Anakin sat on the edge of the cliff. It was a nice gesture. Anakin knew Obi-Wan didn't care for heights. He still couldn't bring himself to care much. Right now, all Anakin wanted to do was be alone. He'd make his decision, and that would be that. The Jedi wouldn't ever have to worry about him again. It would be easier on all of them.

"It won't happen again," he heard himself say. "Leave."

He hated the tone of his voice. He'd meant for it to sound like an

order, but it felt more like a plea.

Obi-Wan considered his options, obviously wondering how to get around that without stepping on toes. Ever the negotiator, even if his expressions were so much easier to read now than they would be in the future.

"If I don't speak, may I stay?" he finally asked.

Anakin didn't have the energy or motivation for a confrontation at the moment, so he shrugged. "Very well."

Obi-Wan nodded with a rather forced smile. He really should be somewhere looking after his own needs. Of course, that was Obi-Wan for you. The Jedi Order came first, the people came second, friends came third and Obi-Wan came last.

The young Jedi relaxed into a meditative pose and closed his eyes. He looked so calm and serene next to Anakin's rigid posture. How was it that he had no energy but had subconsciously reverted to habit and sat with a straight back?

A sudden stab of pain from Obi-Wan rushed through Anakin. It didn't take a genius to realize what the other was thinking about.

"I warned him," Anakin said softly, breaking the silence.

Obi-Wan opened his eyes and glanced over at Anakin with a cautious nod. "That if we were to become separated... yes, he told me."

"Why did you let him go on alone?" Another flare of pain and then a flash of anger quickly dispersed into the Force from the older man. It made no sense. If the Obi-Wan Anakin remembered had known, he wouldn't have let it happen. No matter the age or immaturity, Obi-Wan would have found a way to stop it.

Why was he even asking? It wasn't like he cared... but then, it would be so much easier to sort through his own problems if he didn't have minor distractions from Obi-Wan, too.

"I didn't. The Sith distracted us and knocked me out of the fight." He paused. Anakin continued to listen in silence. "Qui-Gon died protecting me... and you."

Wait, what? "Me?"

Obi-Wan cringed slightly, and Anakin felt a vague self-reproach from the man. After a few contemplative moments, the Jedi finally answered. "We were... distracted; rushing back to help you when the Sith surprised us and knocked me out of the fight leaving my Master to—" he cut off, but he didn't need to finish. Leaving Qui-Gon to fight alone.

So Anakin had been the cause this time. Yet another death on his already full conscience.

Maybe he wasn't feeling numb right now because somehow it just felt... deeper and heavier – smothering.

"I see," he said. The silence became uncomfortable again as neither of them seemed to know what to say next. Anakin shook his head. Now Obi-Wan would resent him more than ever. Who wouldn't resent the man who had killed their father figure? Well, if Anakin were in his place, he undoubtedly would (as had been demonstrated when Obi-Wan had faked his death during the Clone Wars). However, he sensed no such feelings from the Jedi. Was he hiding them?

"You're not angry," he commented so quietly he wasn't sure Obi-Wan had heard him until the other spoke up. He had to confirm it.

"No. Not anymore."

Truth rang through the Force. He wasn't hiding anything. Anakin tried to wrap his head around that. This was why he'd never been able to make heads or tails of his old master. The man never made sense.

"Why?"

"Anger is dangerous for a Jedi," the padawan repeated the old adage. If Anakin could have found the motivation, he would have rolled his eyes. Yes, this was Obi-Wan. Old, unhelpful, annoying, currently inexperienced Obi-Wan.

He must have read the marginal disappointment in Anakin because he sighed slightly and leaned his head back against the cool, rough material coating the palace exterior. "What good would blaming you do?" the Jedi asked. "It isn't your fault." Anakin wanted to snort, but Obi-Wan continued before he could gather the energy and motivation. "You obviously regret your actions, and you did not intend to originally hurt us." Anakin blinked, not taking his eyes off of the green landscape. "If anything, you gave me a few more moments with my Master. I don't see a reason to be anything but grateful to you."

Anakin could not believe what he'd heard. "Grateful?" he asked, incredulity piercing through the suffocating... whatever it was smothering his emotions.

The Jedi regarded him out of the corner of his eye for a moment before he sat up, shaking his head. "Please, Anakin, don't carry the weight of his death on your shoulders. A child your age shouldn't have those kinds of burdens."

A child his age? Burdens? At any other time, he may have laughed out loud. He was about to reply, but Obi-Wan cut him off before he could.

"Besides, you saved the Queen. You protected her when we couldn't. That is no small act." Obi-Wan turned to look back out at the vast, green continent stretching away before them. "Imagine all the lives you've saved because you saved her."

Anakin shook his head. "The Council will not see it that way."

Obi-Wan thought for a moment. "They will take everything into account," he finally responded. "They will realize that it is natural to fall back on your ingrained training." It was Anakin's turn to blink, surprised. He'd never told Obi-Wan about his Dark Side training. Obi-Wan must have noticed the younger boy's slightly panicked surprise. "Qui-Gon didn't tell me anything."

"I just couldn't hide it," Anakin muttered. Yet another failure to add to the already too-long list.

"I don't know why you tried," Obi-Wan said, shaking his head. "But I must admit, I am impressed."

That was not something Obi-Wan said. At least, not to Anakin. "Impressed?" the time-traveler asked, now utterly confused. It seemed he would never be able to understand his former master's way of thinking.

"Anakin, you have either struggled to keep yourself good and light despite your previous training, which would require an almost inhuman amount of willpower and determination, or you have turned back from the dark side. No person in the written history of the Galaxy has done that." The sad smile seemed to turn slightly hopeful. "Either way, you have shown a strength of character that I find difficult to understand."

Anakin blinked at him, far more shocked by those words than he had

even been by his return to the past. Somehow, he'd never quite seen it like that. He did know of people who had fallen and returned to the light (Sajar, Gravid, Praven) but it would make sense that Obi-Wan wouldn't know about them.

"Qui-Gon believed in you," Obi-Wan said quietly. "And I've come to find I can as well."

This time, Anakin shook his head sadly. "Your master trusted me."

"And he didn't regret it."

He didn't live long enough to. But he didn't voice the thought, weakened as it was by Qui-Gon still not regretting his choice even as he lay dying.

"I can't tell you everything. I may never be able to."

Obi-Wan nodded thoughtfully. "That is your decision. I realize I barely know you, but you may speak with me if it will help."

This second invitation he'd received meant so much more than Qui-Gon's for two reasons: One, it came from Obi-Wan. Second, Obi-Wan knew what Anakin could do if pushed too far, and still trusted him.

It touched him, making him feel lighter, like he could hold his head above water again and not drown in the depths of his emotions, numbed and dragged from the light. It helped more than he would care to admit, but it also cut deeply. It reminded him of a time when he and Obi-Wan were closer than brothers; when he'd taken it as a given that his former master would be at his back, lightsaber drawn and a snarky quip on his tongue. It meant a lot, but hurt just as much because the former Sith knew he'd never be able to get that back. There was just too much between them, even if that only came from Anakin.

"I will bear that in mind," he managed to say.

Obi-Wan smiled with a nod, and they fell into a companionable silence for the rest of the evening.

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Anakin stood next to Obi-Wan as the Senator's ship landed in front of the Queen's entourage. If he'd been nervous the first time he'd seen Palpatine, he was an emotional wreck now. He desperately held onto

his mental shields, clinging to them and praying the Senator didn't notice.

He didn't listen to the last few comments from the Queen or Panaka, eyes firmly fixed on the ship as the ramp lowered. It was all he could do to not throw up then and there.

Obi-Wan gave him a worried look and placed a hand on his shoulder reassuringly. It didn't help much.

Anakin followed sedately as Obi-Wan walked forward and bowed to the Senator. And here he'd thought he couldn't feel any more nauseous. He forced himself to bow stiffly as Palpatine walked up to them. Oh, how it galled him to do that.

"We are indebted to you for your bravery, Obi-Wan Kenobi," he said magnanimously.

Anakin clamped down on every single feeling he had, trying desperately to clear his mind. It became that much harder when Palpatine's eyes dropped to him. Anakin couldn't meet them. "And who is this?"

Right, they hadn't said anything about Anakin being there with the Queen, trying to keep it under wraps, thank the Force.

"A potential initiate for the Temple," Obi-Wan replied easily.

"Isn't he a little old?"

Anakin had a hard time keeping a flare of annoyance down. Palpatine had always spoken directly to him. Rarely did he really ignore Anakin. He hadn't realized how he was used to that. How much he still almost wanted it...

"That is for the Council to decide," Obi-Wan replied.

"Indeed," Palpatine said with a smile than turned to look down at Anakin. He looked away, unable to meet those eyes. "And what is your name, young man?"

It took everything ounce of will power he had to open his mouth. "Anakin Skywalker... sir."

"Ah. A pleasure to meet you. I wish you luck, young Skywalker." Anakin ground his teeth, clamping down even harder on his anger.

Palpatine had only called him that for the first few years. After that, he only heard it when the Sith had been discussing Luke. "We shall watch your career with great interest."

With that, he walked past, heading towards the Queen. Just as he did, he touched Anakin on the shoulder. He couldn't help but flinch away. *Don't touch me!* he wanted to yell. But he wouldn't give in to the anger. He wouldn't give that man the satisfaction.

Just as he passed, Anakin caught a glimpse of the other's eyes. To anyone else, he would have looked kind and encouraging, but Anakin saw the hungry glitter.

That quickly, all of his anger vanished and the sick feeling returned like a sledgehammer to his stomach. It felt as if the world had suddenly moved out from under him. *He knows...* he thought, watching as the Senator turned away and continued towards the Queen.

Sending another worried glance at him, Obi-Wan bowed to the Council members now walking calmly towards them. Dully, Anakin followed suit. Then they turned to watch the two Naboo representatives greet each other.

"It seems you were successful after all, Your Majesty," Palpatine said with a smile. "It does my heart good to see such amazing feats accomplished against all odds. You have inspired me to run for the next Chancellorship election. I hope I win so we can prove that working together, peace and prosperity for the Republic is not a mere dream."

Padmé smiled, and even through her makeup Anakin could see the radiance that came from it. For a moment he felt torn, wanting the vile creature to stop talking to his beautiful angel, but as Amidala, she didn't smile often. It was a rare gift, and he also wanted to savor it.

Even if it was not meant for him, he only wanted to see her smile.

"Come, Anakin," Obi-Wan said quietly. For a moment, he felt like a padawan again, tagging along behind his master, but shook the thought from his head. The Council wouldn't allow him to stay. Even if by some miracle they did, he wasn't sure he wanted to be Obi-Wan's apprentice again.

As they all filed back into the Palace, Anakin caught Yoda's gaze. At first, he turned away, trying not to look guilty. Then he nervously

shuffled up to the Grandmaster.

"Here, sir," Anakin said quietly, holding out the lightsaber. Yoda raised an eyebrow and took it, attaching it to his own belt. "Thank you for the use. I am indebted."

"Helpful, you found it?"

Anakin sighed and shook his head, too emotionally weary to be anything but honest. "No, ma-sir. Turned out that I could hardly use it."

"Hmm," Yoda nodded, looking thoughtful. He'd probably expected that turn out one way or another. The old troll.

"Padawan Kenobi," the green Jedi called out. Ahead of them, Obi-Wan turned around at the sound of his name.

"Yes, master?"

"Speak with you we would," he looked back at the Queen and the Senator. "An empty room, have you?"

The Queen blinked, surprised at the request. "Of course," she said, quickly regaining her senses. "Rabé," one of the handmaidens walked up. "Take some guards and show our guests into a meeting room."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Rabé said, bowing her head and curtsying. Then she made the same gesture to the Jedi. "If you would follow me."

Two guards accompanied them all to a meeting room. "I will wait here to show you to your rooms," Rabé said, bowing to them and opening the door. Inside, a large room began to light as they walked into it.

"Wait here, you will," Yoda said to both Anakin and Obi-Wan before moving inside and closing the door.

Rabé and the guards stood on either side of the doors while Anakin and Obi-Wan shuffled nervously in place.

"What do they wish to speak of?" Anakin asked.

"Probably the Sith."

Anakin shook his head. "This soon? Why not wait until they had been shown to their quarters?"

Obi-Wan shook his head with a slight shrug. "That is the only explanation I can think of at the moment."

With a sigh, Anakin nodded in understanding.

They waited for several minutes before the entire council came shuffling back out. "If we could be shown to our quarters now," Ki-Adi-Mundi said with a smile to Rabé.

She looked a little taken back, but nodded. "Yes, sir," she said, only the slightest waver in her voice. "This way."

Before they followed her, Plo Koon turned and smiled at them (somehow it was visible behind the mask, although Anakin had never been able to tell if that was just what he projected through the Force or something so subtle that he could only subconsciously catch it). "Master Yoda will explain. You may enter now."

Trading glances, Obi-Wan and Anakin waited for the Council members to leave before walking into the large room. With the setting sun in the background, it seemed dark compared to the normal Council chambers and the Throne room.

Yoda stood in the middle, leaning on his gimmer stick and watching them approach. Obi-Wan knelt on one knee a few feet from the older being. Anakin did the same.

"Good news, I have," he said in a light voice as he faced Obi-Wan. "Confer upon you the rank of Knight, the Council does."

Obi-Wan blinked. Anakin knew this was not entirely unexpected, but in these times, it was out of the ordinary.

"Thank you, Master," the young man said, bowing his head in gratitude and respect.

"As for you, Young Skywalker..." Anakin tried not to flinch at the name. If Yoda noticed, he didn't say anything. "Accept you as an initiate, the Council does."

Right about then, his brain stopped working as it focused all of its energy on processing that. *Accept* him? Even after everything he'd done?

"B-but I..." for the first time in decades, Anakin found himself at a complete and utter loss. "Surely you know," he said finally.

Yoda nodded grimly. "Once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny. Yet fight it, you do. Come back you did. Know this, we do. Impressed, we are." He smiled over at Anakin, giggling in that strange humm-like way he always did. "Proven yourself, you have."

Anakin blinked, unable to comprehend what he'd just heard.

"Come. To our quarters, we should go. Tired I am. Rest, I must," Yoda said as he walked past them and to the doors. Obi-Wan stood to follow and had to tap Anakin's arm before the boy seemed to realize that he needed to go as well.

He walked out last, still in a daze as the guards closed the doors behind him.

The Jedi Council. The stiff, strict, sitting with sticks-up-their-butts, complacent and never changing Jedi Council had accepted him... without Obi-Wan or Qui-Gon seriously interfering.

Right about then, his mind gave up processing that information and he slipped into auto pilot as the three Jedi strode through the palace.

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They held Qui-Gon's funeral that night.

Obi-Wan still felt the wound in his heart left by his former master, but he also found the ritual comforting. The Queen, Senator Palpatine, Boss Nass, most of the rebellion leaders and many of the other people they'd come to know while on Naboo stood silently by as Qui-Gon's body burned.

He heard a few whispered conversations in the background, but couldn't bring himself to care. His master was being laid to rest on a planet filled with the Living Force. He would only allow himself to feel peace this night and remember the good man that his master had been.

Beside him, Anakin looked on sadly.

"I never congratulated you," he said quietly.

Obi-Wan turned and looked down at the blond. "On what?"

"Your Knighthood."

The Jedi nodded, understanding. "Thank you." They fell into silence, watching the flames dance before their eyes. "I never congratulated you on becoming an initiate."

He felt the slightest ping of incredulity from the boy. Apparently. he still hadn't gotten used to the idea. Not that Obi-Wan could blame him. The Temple and a normal childhood would be good for the former slave. Well, a semi-normal childhood. It had to be an improvement in any case.

Anakin didn't speak again for several minutes. When he did, his voice had grown soft. "He was proud of you, you know."

Obi-Wan couldn't help a small, sad smile, although he felt more than grateful to the insightful little boy. It felt as if a fist around his heart had unclenched a little, somehow.

"Yes. I know."

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Palpatine looked down at the crowd in front of him, grinning like an insane school boy in the sunlight. Such an obvious display, with the Naboo cheering on their newly found Gungan comrades. It made him sick. How long would such a connection last? He gave it a decade. Two, tops. Not that it mattered. In a decade, if all went according to plan, he would be Chancellor, and in a prime position to finally rid the galaxy of this useless Republic – to take his *rightful* place as Emperor.

But he had to remain patient now more than ever. He hid his resentment towards the Jedi (who had managed to throw a wrench in his plans *again*) and hoarded it for later power, all while hiding behind his benevolent smile.

He stood to the side of the Queen, positioned next to the two Jedi that had supposedly saved their planet. Jedi Kenobi, a lost cause if Palpatine ever saw one; strong in the Force, but so utterly brainwashed that he could be of little use. Jedi Traavis stood next to him. Also a lost cause. Young and eager, but far too moralistic.

For just a moment, his eyes wandered back to the boy, now wearing Jedi robes and standing next to the members of the Council. Palpatine had noticed him before, but now he couldn't help but find himself intrigued. Just who was this boy? Why had the fools on the Council decided to allow him into the Temple? Did he have a connection to

the powerful presence he'd felt?

And there was another mystery; the dark presence. It hadn't been just any dark presence, but a fully-trained Sith. The boy had shielding, that much was obvious. He also seemed more wary about Palpatine than most people he met. Did he know something? If so, why hadn't he told the Jedi?

Skywalker had refused to meet his eyes for the most part and continued to stare out at the crowd before them.

Just who was Anakin Skywalker?

Such questions, such mysteries. Palpatine had a feeling that he would enjoy unraveling them. And unravel them, he would; whether the boy wanted him to or not. Still, it would also take time and patience. Fortunately, Palpatine had enough of both.

"Peace!" Boss Nass said in a booming voice, drawing the undercover Sith from his thoughts and holding up the Globe of Peace. A great cheer arose from the gathered crowd.

Palpatine smiled out at the parade again while the young, idealistic Queen beamed beside him. He had to admit he was (grudgingly) impressed with her. Not only did she manage to see through his manipulations, but she also miraculously freed her people with a handful of supporters and managed to survive an assault from one of the most dangerous assassins in the known galaxy.

He didn't even know how she'd done such a thing.

Well, the assassin had lived. He was planning on questioning her himself eventually.

For now, he would overlook The Queen's presence. It would take too many resources to take her out now that her threat had passed. Resources that he needed to put to use finding another apprentice.

Fortunately, he already had someone in mind. Someone who could be his in only a few short months...

His plans may have been set back a little, but such a small thing could not throw them off. Eventually, the Jedi would fall and the Galaxy would be his. As it should be.

He grinned.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Thank you betas!

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

> Note: You are getting this because I have revamped this story. Hopefully the whole thing flows better, is clearer and easier to understand and more consistent than before. Also, I broke up one of the longer chapters, so this had to happen. FYI.
>
> Nothing really major changed, I just wanted smooth out a few areas make the dialog a little bit more believable add in some details that make the rest of the story is much better camo stuff like that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Anakin couldn't remember when he'd felt this nervous over something so insignificant. He'd be starting classes in the temple today.

Oh, he remembered classes well enough, but that was before, when he hadn't asked the Council to not tell anyone of his supposed prophecy. That had been when he'd only been accepted because of Obi-Wan. Back when he'd either been an outcast due to awe or jealousy. This time, perhaps he could make some decent allies.

Faces of some of the original initiates and padawans he'd met flashed across his mind. Ferus, Darra, Tru...

Then again, maybe not.

Something that both worried and relieved him, though, was that fact that this time, he wouldn't have Obi-Wan to back him up. Before, when classes had become unbearable, he'd talked with Obi-Wan or Palpatine. He couldn't do either at the moment. Not strictly speaking anyway. He wouldn't go to Palpatine if the universe ended, and Obi-Wan would now be off starting his days as a knight.

Without an apprentice.

Thinking of Obi-Wan as a Knight without Anakin by his side felt incredibly strange. Most of his memories of Obi-Wan were from when he'd been a Knight with a young padawan sharing his quarters. Now Anakin had a small, initiate room of his own, far away from Obi-Wan's apartment.

In all actuality, he loved the idea of his own space. He couldn't remember if initiates normally got their own rooms or had to sleep in barracks of some sort, but he wasn't about to look a gift-horse in the mouth. He knew the creche children didn't have their own rooms, just cubicles with beds and a few places for personal items.

Blinking, he looked back down at his still-empty bag and berated himself for being foolish, Anakin turned to the task at hand, making sure he had everything he would need. A few blank data pads, flimsy and styluses in case he needed to put down a diagram, and several data pads filled with information about the latest gadgetry in case he became bored (which he undoubtedly would). He was just going over his list one final time when he heard doors open behind him and felt a familiar presence.

"Master Yoda," he said, somewhat surprised as he turned to face the diminutive master. "Why are you here?"

Yoda chuckled. "Come to escort you, I have."

"Escort me?"

"To your classes, mmm?"

Anakin blinked. "But… you're the Grandmaster. Why escort me?"

Yoda walked in, using his little cane for balance. Anakin often wondered about that. With the Force, it wasn't like the little being needed it. He somehow suspected that the little troll just liked to hit people with it.

"Know me, you do. Familiar I am, no?"

Anakin sighed. "You're worried." Would he have to have an escort everywhere now? The last thing he needed to put up with right now was a babysitter. It would make so many of his plans far too difficult...

Yoda nodded his head. "Worried for you, I am."

"For me?" Anakin asked, immediately suspicious. Yoda had never been this welcoming to him initially. What had changed?

"New this is. No master have you. Felt I could help, I did."

Anakin tipped his head, his suspicion not receding. "Why?"

"A Jedi you are, now. If help, you need, provide it, we will."

Despite himself, a knot in the time-traveler's chest began to unravel a little at the olive branch being offered to him. "That's... all?"

Yoda nodded.

"I will not have an escort tomorrow?" Anakin asked slowly.

Yoda shook his head with a smile. "Important you are, but not that important."

In his old life, that would have made Anakin angry and resentful. He was the Chosen One! How could he not be important?

But at that moment, to his great surprise, Anakin found that that was exactly what he needed to hear.

Nodding his head, he hefted the bag full of data pads onto his shoulder. Darth Vader wouldn't say what came to mind next, but Anakin would have... and he found that was what he preferred to fall back on right now.

"Thank you, Master Yoda."

Yoda just chuckled and led the way through the door.

Chapter End Notes

Continued in: Dangers of Foresight! Don't forget to like this story if you enjoyed it! Than you again to Amidala Skywaker and Khalthar and anyone else who has helped me out on this! It definitely wouldn't have happened if I didn't have you.

Also, if you have any fanart, let me know! I'd love to post links here! :D

Works inspired by this one

Podfic of Hindsight is not Perfect by quathis

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!